

Ready, Willing, and Able



Citizens Working for Change



**Pew Partnership
For Civic Change**

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A SURVEY COMMISSIONED by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change dispels the popular myth that Americans are isolated in their homes and offices—shunning civic activities and unwilling to get involved. According to a poll of 1,830 Americans, people have a profound sense of connectivity to their communities and their neighbors, are volunteering in record numbers, are helping neighbors to solve problems, and are optimistic about the future.

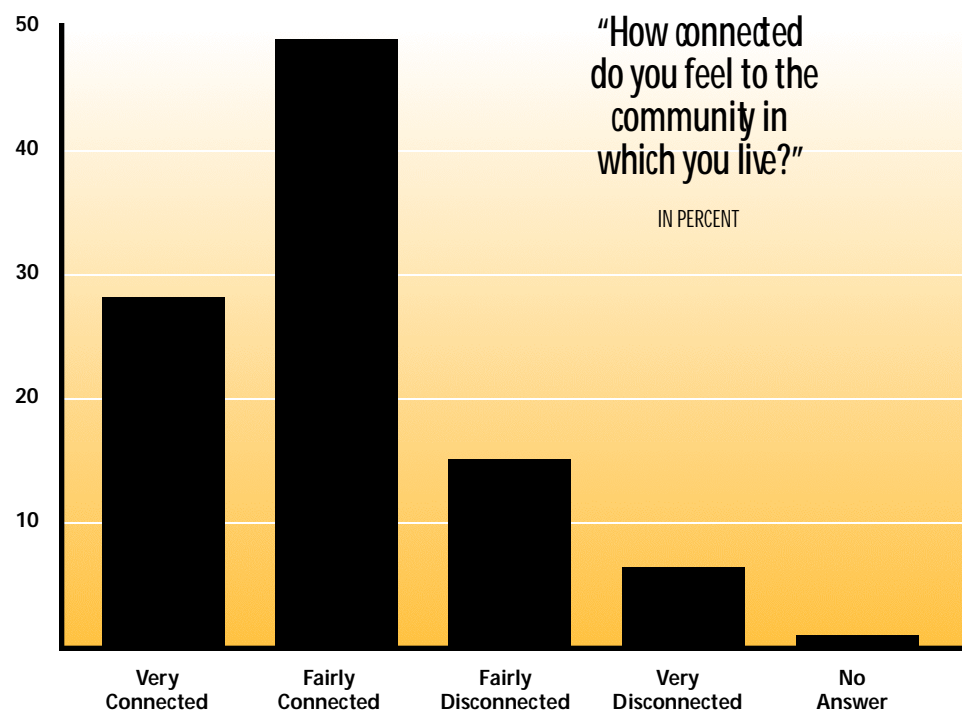
While America's venue for civic engagement has changed, its commitment is alive and well. Citizens of all races, backgrounds, and ages are poised and ready to find solutions to community problems. The poll, conducted by the Campaign Study Group, identifies barriers to greater civic activism and outlines what the public sees as the biggest problems facing our communities and whom it regards as problem solvers. Here's how Americans feel about their communities, prospects for the future, and the work ahead.



How Do Americans Feel About Where They Live?

CITIZENSHIP BEGINS AND FLOURISHES where we live and work. Despite misgivings about national initiatives, citizens feel positive about their local communities and express a strong feeling of optimism for the future.

- n Seventy-seven percent of Americans feel very or fairly connected to their communities. This connectedness increases with age. In the age group 18-29, 66% feel connected as compared to 85% of those aged 65 and over.
- n Among those who feel most connected to their communities, sixty percent say that they regularly attend religious services.
- n Seventy-four percent of Americans view the quality of life in their community as excellent or good. However, whites are twice as likely as African-Americans to view their community as offering an excellent quality of life.
- n Sixty-five percent of citizens say they are optimistic that their community's best years as a place to live are ahead. While more of those with higher incomes (78%) feel optimistic, even a majority of those with the lowest incomes (56%) feel optimistic.



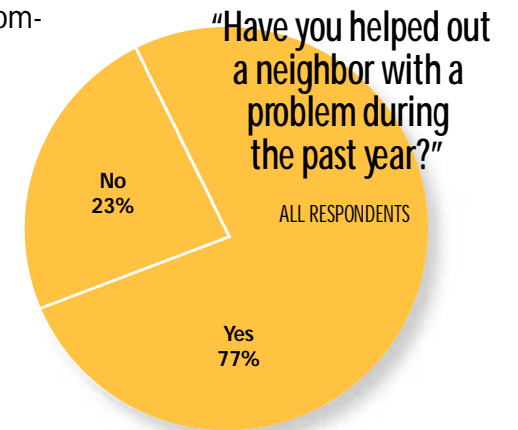
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Are Citizens Engaged in Their Communities?

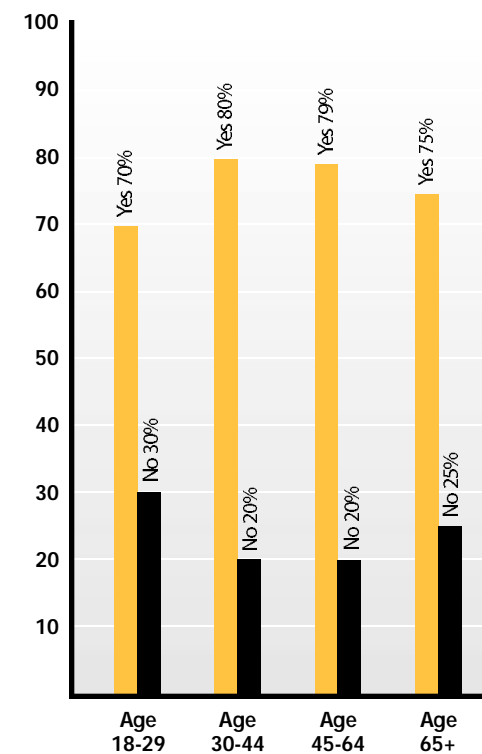
THIS GENERALLY STRONG SENSE of community translates directly into active community involvement. While the precise nature of this involvement takes many forms, it is clear that Americans are connected to each other and to their communities in significant ways.



- n Seventy-eight percent of citizens donated money to local charities, religious institutions, and nonprofit organizations during the past year.
- n A similar number (77%) helped a neighbor with a problem during the past twelve months. Americans of all income levels and ages reported reaching out to a neighbor.

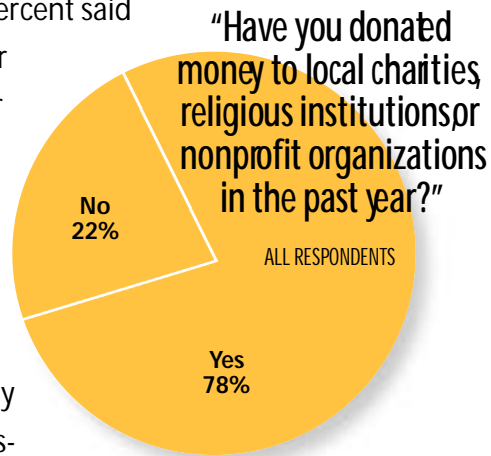
Helped Out a Neighbor

RESPONDENTS BY AGE, IN PERCENT



- n Nearly six out of ten adults (59%) talked over a community problem with friends or co-workers in the past month.
- n More than half (54%) or 111 million Americans volunteered in the past year—a record number. Among those in the 18-29 year old bracket, 50% say they volunteered in the past year. This is a similar rate (49%) for those aged 65 and over. Almost 60% of those aged 30-44 volunteered in the past year.

n For those who did not volunteer, almost two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they could not find time to do so. Forty-one percent said they wanted to get involved in their community but didn't know how or who to call.

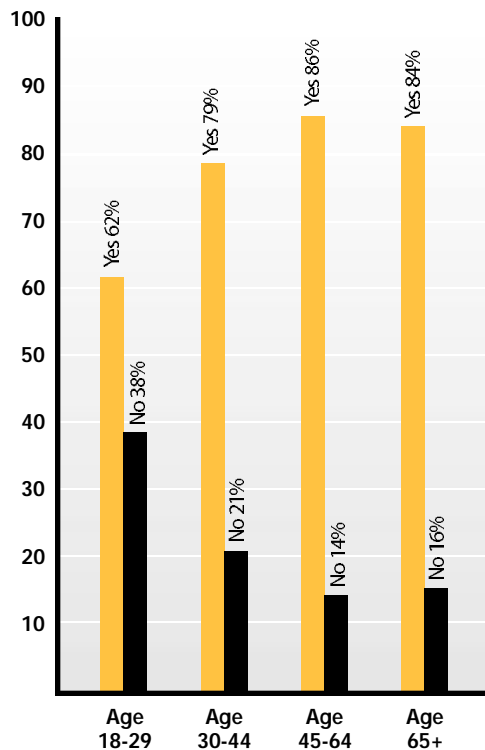


Compared with the level of volunteering, the finding that only one-third of Americans say they have been active in some type of community group or club during the last year is disturbing but not alarming given other measures.

This is particularly acute among those aged 18 to 29 whose participation in community groups only reached 26%. Yet almost 40% of respondents say they have attended some type of community or neighborhood meeting over the past year. African-Americans are somewhat more likely than whites or Hispanics to report this type of activity.

Donated to Community Organizations

RESPONDENTS BY AGE, IN PERCENT



n Nearly 40% of working adults (54 million Americans) say they have gotten together with co-workers to sponsor a food-drive, walk-a-thon, or other type of community activity in the past 12 months.

n A majority of Americans still believe that voting matters. Fifty-seven percent say that voting affects how decisions are made. Sixty-one percent of those aged 30 to 44 say that voting has some impact compared with less than 50% of those 65 and older.

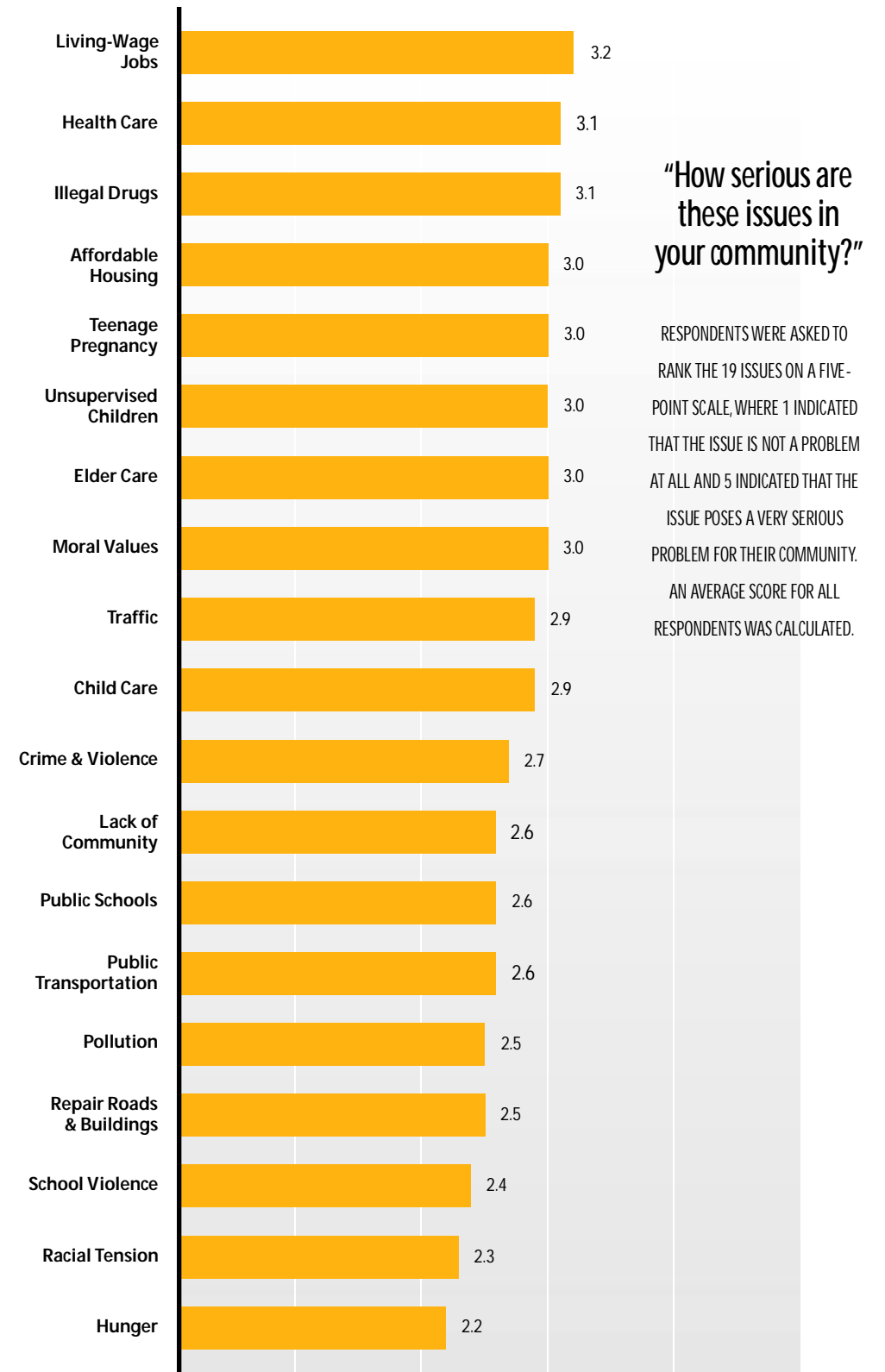


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Addressing the Real Issues

DESPITE THE PROMISE of community involvement and the booming economy, Americans still have serious concerns. Too many people are being left behind or shut out of the services and help they need. When asked to rank the most serious problems in their community, citizens responded with human rather than infrastructure concerns. The problem that raised the most concern among Americans of all ages and income levels was the lack of living-wage jobs. The lack of affordable health care and the availability and use of illegal drugs also raised high levels of concern.

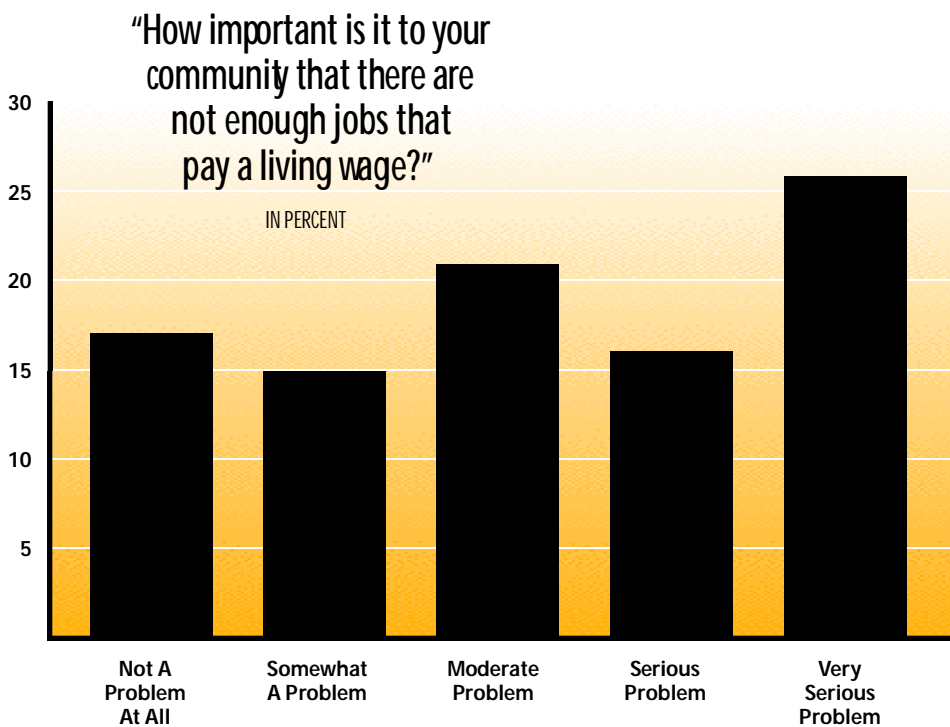
n Forty-two percent of all respondents indicated that the lack of jobs providing a living wage was the most significant problem facing their community. Non-whites were significantly more likely than whites to rate living-wage jobs as a major problem.



n Thirty-nine percent rated the lack of affordable health care as a serious or very serious problem for their community.

n Thirty-eight percent see illegal drugs as a serious or very serious problem in their community.

Five other issues weighed heavily on citizens' minds, with almost a third of all Americans rating them as serious or very serious. These include problems concerning too many unsupervised children and teenagers, not enough affordable care for the elderly, a decline in moral values, not enough affordable housing, and teenage pregnancies.



The problem that raised the most concern among all Americans was the lack of living-wage jobs

How Can the Future Change for the Better?

WHILE PROOF ABOUND that Americans are actively engaged in their communities, the perception persists that public apathy limits our ability to solve critical problems. Seventy percent of respondents said that people do not get involved enough in their communities. That is countered by 41% who said that they would get involved if they knew how and where they were needed.

When asked to identify problem solvers in their communities, Americans confidently stated that local police departments, religious institutions, nonprofit organizations, and friends and neighbors are the top problem solvers in their communities.

- n Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed rated local police departments as crucial or important to problem solving. While whites are more likely than non-whites to view the police as playing a strong role in the solution of local problems, even among non-whites the police ranked extremely high compared with other institutions.
- n Fifty-six percent say that local churches, synagogues, and mosques are important or crucial to finding solutions. African-Americans (38%) are more likely than whites (29%) to rank religious institutions as crucial to local problem solving. The confidence expressed by African-Americans in religious institutions was the highest score granted by that group to any of the fifteen institutions measured.
- n Nonprofit organizations such as the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, and Goodwill Industries also received strong votes of confidence. Fifty-three percent say that they are crucial or very important to the solution of community problems.
- n More than fifty percent of the respondents say that friends and neighbors are problem solvers in the community. This held true across race and income levels and it was even more evident among those aged 65 and older, where (62%) agreed with this statement.

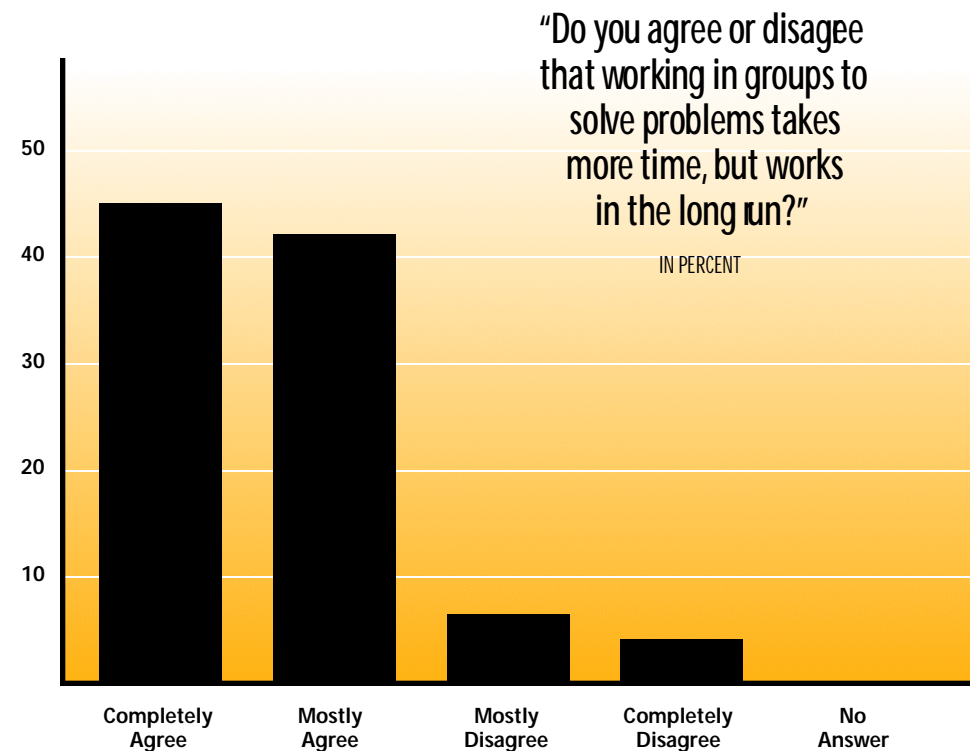


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- n Other problem solvers that received high marks as being crucial or very important were parent-teacher organizations (47%), local government officials (43%), local foundations and United Ways (39%), neighborhood organizations (39%), and school boards (38%).
- n One of the last entities (ranked 14th out of fifteen) that the public expects to help with local problems is the federal government. More than one-third say that the federal government plays little or no role in local problem solving.
- n Fifty-eight percent of Americans believe that community problems are too big for individuals to solve alone.
- n Almost ninety percent of citizens say that working with others to solve problems takes more time but gets better results in the long run.



Observations

AMERICANS ARE NEITHER selfish nor apathetic by nature. To the contrary, this survey shows that a large number of citizens are actively engaged with others in their communities in efforts that they feel make a difference. While the number of Americans involved in civic organizations has declined, from an estimated two-thirds of the population in 1975 to one-third in 2000, civic engagement is about more than joining organizations. It must also be measured by the extent to which people will help out their neighbors, connect with others through faith and work, and volunteer.

Religious and nonprofit organizations are both a source and a conduit for problem solving and community connectedness. With more than half indicating that religious and nonprofit organizations are crucial or very important to problem solving, the evidence is compelling for matching local problems to local organizations.

Finally, among the age groups, those aged 30 to 64 seem to be more optimistic and more engaged than either their younger or older counterparts. While older Americans feel more connected to their communities, they are also the most pessimistic overall about the prospects for the future. The youngest in the survey (18-29) reveal the detachment so often featured in the media, with only one out of ten involved in political activities. But there are also hopeful signs that some young people are finding ways to connect with other citizens through work and volunteering. Very hopeful is that almost ninety percent of Americans of all ages have not given up and believe that working together is the best way to solve community problems.



For a copy of the full report, *Ready, Willing, and Able*, please visit our website at www.pew-partnership.org

The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is a civic research organization funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by the University of Richmond.

The Campaign Study Group, located in Springfield, Virginia, is a public opinion and campaign finance research firm.

Photos by Rob Amberg.

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