

# Economist shows good fences do make good neighbors

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A new study led by a UC Irvine economist debunks a popular argument against urban sprawl -- that living farther from neighbors decreases social interaction. In fact, the data shows that suburban living is better for one's social life.

Using data from 15,000 Americans living in various places across the country, researchers found that residents of sprawling suburban spaces actually have more friends, more contact with neighbors and greater involvement in community organizations than citydwellers who live in very close proximity to each other.

"Our findings suggest the old proverb may be true: good fences make good neighbors," said Jan Brueckner, professor of economics at UCI and lead author of the paper. "This contradicts one of the common social and economic arguments against urban sprawl."

Among their specific findings were that for every 10-percent decrease in density, the likelihood of residents talking to their neighbors at least once a week jumps by 10 percent. And involvement in hobby-oriented clubs increases even more significantly -- by 15 percent for every 10 percent decline in density. To measure these and other social interactions, researchers used data from the Social Capital Benchmark Survey and controlled for other factors such as income, education and marital status.

Opponents of urban sprawl -- most famously "Bowling Alone" author

Robert Putnam -- have argued that America's spreading development is detrimental to society, causing increased traffic congestion, loss of valuable open space and a decline in social relationships. To combat these perceived problems, some cities like Portland, Ore., have enacted urban growth boundaries to limit sprawl.

Brueckner says it's important to understand the true impact of urban sprawl on traffic, open space and social relationships, because these all affect the economy.

"Strong social networks do more than just keep people happy and engaged," said Brueckner. "The more friends you have and the more involved you are in your community, then the better are your labor market outcomes -- shorter unemployment spells, better job matches -- as a result of job referrals." While the researchers say it's still unclear exactly why denser city living decreases social interaction, Brueckner says people may be more willing to engage in activities like clubs, civic organizations and community events when they don't feel forced upon one another. Another factor limiting social interaction in cities may be fear of crime, which discourages people from getting to know each other.

Source: University of California - Irvine

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