

# Ho! Ho! Huh? Researchers measure holiday spirit

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The holidays just wouldn't be the same without the decorations. From a single wreath or child's picture of Santa taped to a window, to displays so elaborate that they can almost be seen from outer space, the festive season seems to spur the need to express the holiday spirit to our neighbors in addition to our closest kin. But neighborhoods also vary in the vigor of their holiday displays, as anyone who tours the streets of their town or city can attest.

Scientists at Binghamton University, State University of New York, have decided to measure the holiday spirit. A simple scoring system was developed that ranged from zero (no decorations whatsoever) to four (representing different categories of decorations). A high score does not require wealth; even the humble residents of a trailer can score a four if they have the holiday spirit. A special category was even created for the kind of "over the top" display.

Armed with clipboards and pencils, volunteers spread throughout the Binghamton, NY, community city to score the houses on randomly assigned streets during a five-day period, December 16-20. Then they converged on the Cyber Café, a popular local watering hole, to enter and collate the data. On December 21, the data will be relayed to Binghamton University's Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Center and used to produce a topographic map of the city, in which the "hills" and "valleys" represent neighborhoods with high and low average values of decoration scores and the points represent the "over the top" houses.

The idea of studying decorations might seem as if the scientists are hitting the holiday eggnog a little early, but there is serious business beneath the whimsy, according to project leader David Sloan Wilson, distinguished professor in the Departments of Biology and Anthropology at Binghamton University.

"Many scientists who study human behavior are lazy confining their research to easily accessible college students," Wilson comments. "There is a great need to study people from all ages and walks of life, as they go about their daily lives."

Wilson directs an initiative called the Binghamton Neighborhood Project, which seeks to create a general infrastructure for studying and improving the quality of life in the City of Binghamton and to provide a model for other communities.

"We have already created GIS maps measuring the quality of neighborhoods based on survey data," Wilson reports. "Holiday decorations represent a natural expression of community spirit that we can correlate with the survey data."

According to Wilson, neighborhood-based research in other cities has shown that community spirit, which is also called "social capital," can have an important influence on everything from crime to healthy child development. Winter holiday decorations might be unduly influenced by a single religious tradition (Christianity), but Wilson and his volunteers mounted a similar effort during Halloween, a holiday with pagan roots.

"No single measure of community spirit is perfect," Wilson stresses. "So we must be careful to include multiple measurements."

Whatever it means, the GIS map of Binghamton's winter holiday decorations is aesthetically pleasing. I'm sending it to all my colleagues,

friends, and relations, " Wilson smiles. "It might be the first holiday card that includes a methods section."

Source: Binghamton University

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