

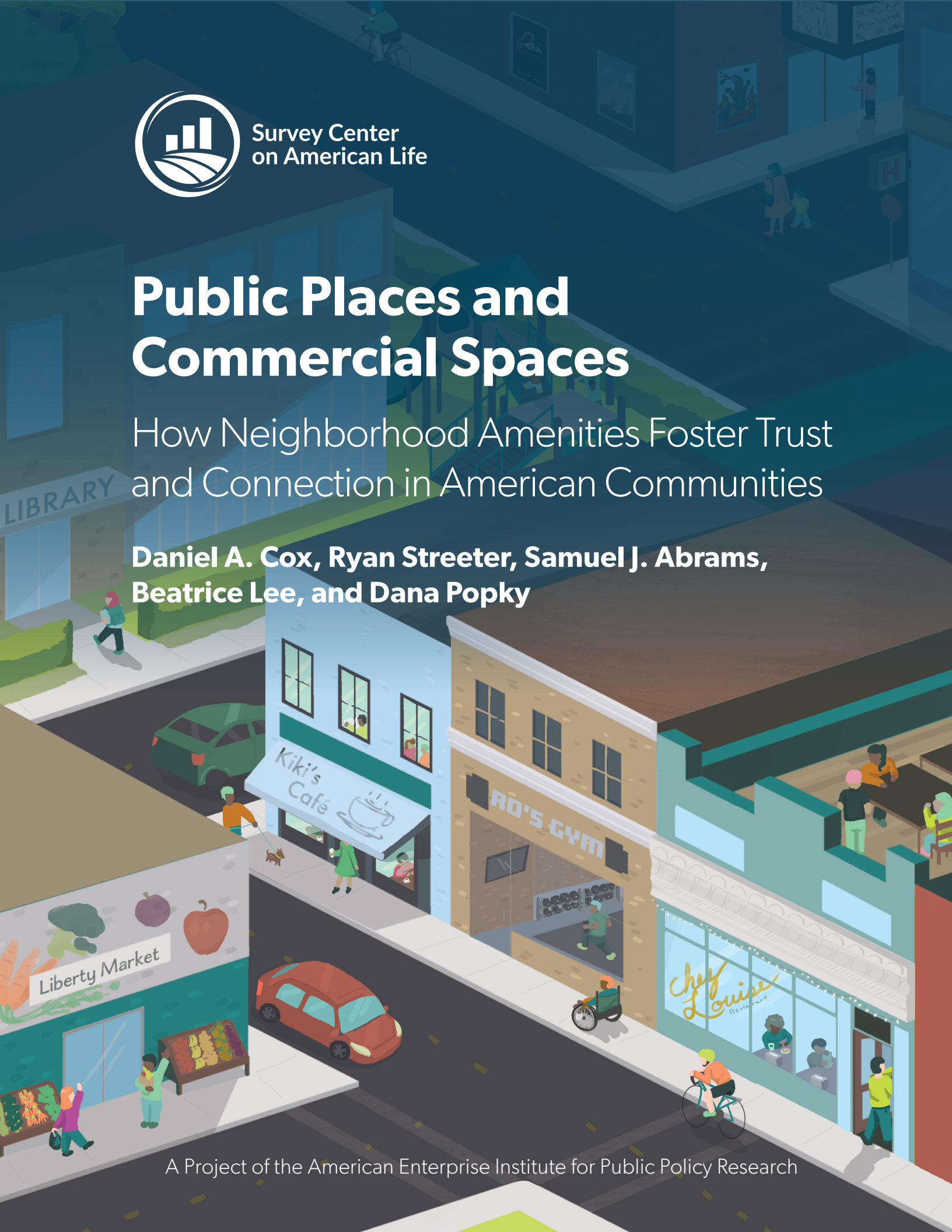


Survey Center
on American Life

Public Places and Commercial Spaces

How Neighborhood Amenities Foster Trust
and Connection in American Communities

**Daniel A. Cox, Ryan Streeter, Samuel J. Abrams,
Beatrice Lee, and Dana Popky**



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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Americans across the country to reconsider their community preferences. Today, many Americans would prefer to live in small towns or rural areas rather than denser urban neighborhoods, and they are more likely to prioritize personal space over access to community amenities.

When it comes to rating their communities, White Americans are more positive about their neighborhoods than are Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. But White Americans are also less optimistic about the future of their communities than other groups are. Forty-three percent of Asian Americans, 42 percent of Black Americans, and 39 percent of Hispanic Americans say their communities will get better in the near future, compared to 30 percent of White Americans.

Many Americans live close to at least some local amenities. Close proximity to amenities such as cafes and parks increases neighborliness, feelings of safety, social trust, and positive feelings about the community. For Americans living in urban and suburban areas, greater amenity access is linked to higher levels of trust. More than three-quarters of high-amenity urbanites (76 percent) and suburbanites (77 percent) trust their neighbors at least a fair amount, compared to 62 percent and 60 percent of those living in low-amenity cities and suburbs, respectively.

Most (56 percent) Americans have a local spot they regularly visit and are more likely than not to recognize other people there. Americans who have a regular community spot and say they see their neighbors there are more likely than those who do not to feel closely connected to their communities.

Policing has been at the forefront of political debate in much of the past year. And while many believe Black Americans and other minorities are treated differently by the police, support for local police forces remains high. Additionally, ideological divides are wider than racial ones are. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of liberals and just 13 percent of conservatives favor cutting police funding and shifting it to social services. About half (53 percent) of Black, 49 percent of Asian, 40 percent of Hispanic, and 31 percent of White Americans support cutting funding for police.

Americans do not always feel secure in their neighborhoods, but feelings of personal safety vary widely. About only half (53 percent) the public say they would feel very or somewhat comfortable leaving the door unlocked while they are home. Nearly half (47 percent) say they would not be comfortable leaving their doors unlocked. A majority (62 percent) of White Americans feel comfortable leaving their doors unlocked, but less than half of Black (33 percent), Hispanic (39 percent), and Asian (34 percent) Americans say the same.

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In their daily lives, Americans do not always fit popular narratives about how they are doing and what they care about. This is particularly true when we examine the ins and outs of American community life and the things that animate our day-to-day lives.

When it comes to the most basic question of where we want to live, more Americans want to live in small towns or rural areas than urban neighborhoods, and more young people want to live in the suburbs than cities.

Local concerns often diverge from those on the national political stage. Most people worry more about crime and high taxes where they live than they do about immigration or the environment.

Most Americans say that they have a local spot in their community they visit regularly and that they enjoy the benefits of living close to community amenities. However, a majority say they would prefer larger lot sizes over proximity to amenities if they had to choose—a substantial increase over the past few years and likely related to the pandemic's effect on preferences.

This report also challenges existing narratives around attitudes toward law enforcement and community policing. With an uptick in violent crime, the public expresses little support for cutting police budgets. In fact, politics predicts whether people believe police funding

should be cut more than race does. And while we document significant concerns about how police treat Black Americans and other minorities, there is strong support across the board for having greater police presence in the community.

White and rural Americans are more positive about the current state of their communities than are urban, Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, and yet the latter are more optimistic about the future of their communities.

Finally, this report documents some of the hidden benefits neighborhoods offer to residents. Living close to a variety of amenities, such as cafes and parks, increases neighborliness, feelings of safety, social trust, and positive feelings about the community.

These and a host of other findings in *Public Places and Commercial Spaces: How Neighborhood Amenities Foster Trust and Connection in American Communities* illuminate the state of communities in America. Based on a survey of 5,058 adults, the report showcases American community life as it is, offering insights into what binds people together and endears them to the places where they live and work. As such, it is a helpful counterweight to the attention that division and bitterness get these days.

Building on our previous surveys of community life in America, this report looks at the physical and social

features of the geographic landscape of our lives. Do we like where we live, and why? Where would we live if we could? Do we feel safe, and do we trust our neighbors? What makes us connected to where we live?

The survey's findings illuminate important aspects of Americans' day-to-day lives in the neighborhoods and communities they call home.

Community Satisfaction, Safety, and Trust

Americans are generally satisfied with their local communities but are a bit less optimistic about the future of the places where they live. Nationally, 56 percent rate their communities as good, and another 29 percent say they are excellent. Only 12 percent say fair, and just 2 percent say poor.

When asked how their communities will fare over the next five years, Americans are more optimistic than pessimistic, but most do not expect much change. More than half (51 percent) believe their communities will stay the same. One-third (33 percent) think things will get better, and 15 percent expect things to get worse.

What affects how Americans rate their communities? One major driver is formal and informal social capital. Formal engagement in religious and community organizations, such as volunteering regularly, elevates people's views of where they live and how they see the future. So does simply interacting informally with friends and neighbors.

The relationship between faith and community satisfaction is especially pronounced in this regard. Forty percent of Americans who report going to religious services more than once a week rate their communities as excellent, compared to 29 percent who seldom attend and 25 percent who never do.¹ Those who attend religious services more than once a week (40 percent) are also more likely than those who attend seldom (31 percent) or never (30 percent) to believe their communities will improve over the next five years.

The same effect is evident in civic engagement. Forty-six percent of Americans who volunteer more than once a week and 41 percent of those who volunteer weekly think their communities are excellent places, compared to just 24 percent of those who do not volunteer. Thirty-eight percent of those who volunteer more than once a week believe their communities will improve over the next five years. Only 27 percent of those who never volunteer think the same.

These relationships between religious and civic engagement and people's views of their communities are evidence of the power of regular, meaningful interaction with friends, neighbors, and people in groups with whom we feel a kind of kinship. Feeling connected to others in a community is closely related to how one views that community. Two-thirds (66 percent) of Americans who say they feel very closely connected to their neighborhoods and the people who live there rate them excellent places to live, compared to 13 percent of those who do not feel closely connected at all. The very closely connected are nearly twice as likely as the disconnected are (45 percent vs. 25 percent) to believe their neighborhoods will get better in the coming five years.

Urban areas present an interesting case regarding optimism. While rural Americans are almost twice as likely as big-city residents are (36 percent vs. 19 percent) to rate their communities as excellent places to live, urbanites are more likely to see promise in the future. Thirty-nine percent of residents in big cities expect their communities to improve in the next five years, compared to 29 percent of rural Americans.

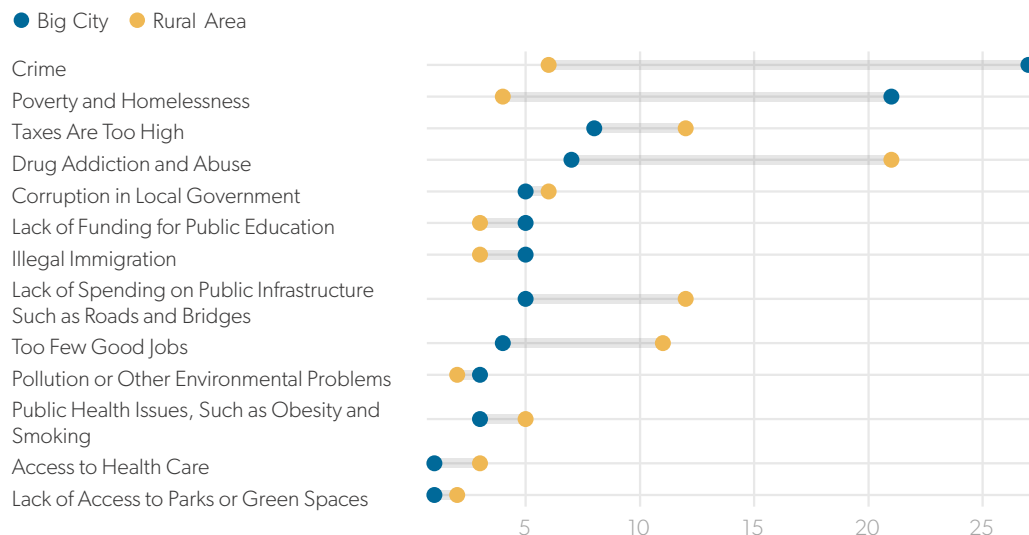
There are also racial dynamics at work when considering how Americans view the future of their communities versus their current state. Forty-three percent of Asian Americans and 42 percent of Black Americans say their communities will get better in the near future, compared to 39 percent of Hispanic Americans and 30 percent of White Americans. White Americans are the only group for whom a majority (54 percent) believe that life in their communities is unlikely to change. This stands in unique contrast to how each racial group rates their communities right now. One-third (33 percent) of White Americans say their communities are excellent, compared to just 19 percent of Black Americans, 23 percent of Hispanic Americans, and 31 percent of Asian Americans.

Notably, White Americans with a college degree are more likely than those without to report higher levels of community satisfaction. Nearly four in 10 (39 percent) White Americans who have at least a bachelor's degree say their communities are excellent, while three in 10 (30 percent) White Americans without a college degree say the same.

As might be expected, age is strongly associated with community satisfaction. This is likely due to older people having both longevity in a community and a greater ability to choose where to live. Thirty-seven percent of seniors (age 65 or older) rate where they live as excellent, compared to 22 percent of young adults (age 18–29).

Figure 1. Americans in Big Cities Are Most Concerned About Crime, Poverty, and Homelessness

Percentage of Americans living in big cities and rural areas who say the MOST important problem in their community is . . .



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

The Most Important Community Problems. Issues such as public infrastructure spending, abortion, and climate change dominate much of the national political discourse. But when asked about the most important problem in their own communities, Americans are most troubled by crime (15 percent), high taxes (14 percent), and drug addiction and abuse (11 percent).

After a year of upheaval in American cities, it is perhaps no surprise that Americans view crime as the most important problem in their local communities. Notably, Americans who closely follow local news are no more likely than those who do not to cite crime as a top concern (16 percent vs. 15 percent). The emphasis on these prevailing concerns varies in important ways. While Black and Hispanic Americans are most worried about crime, White and Asian Americans are more concerned with high taxes. A quarter (25 percent) of Black Americans and two in 10 (20 percent) Hispanic Americans say crime is the most important problem in their local communities. Lack of good employment opportunities follows as Black Americans' (13 percent) second most important issue, while 16 percent of Hispanic Americans cite poverty and homelessness. White and Asian Americans say high taxes are their highest concern. Fifteen percent of White Americans and 23 percent of Asian Americans regard high taxes as their number-one concern, with drug addiction

(13 percent) and poverty and homelessness (15 percent) as their second-biggest concerns, respectively.

Top concerns vary depending on additional factors, including type of municipality, gender, and ideology. Big-city dwellers cite crime as their biggest concern (27 percent), while suburbanites in large metro areas cite high taxes (21 percent), and rural residents cite drug addiction and abuse (21 percent). (See Figure 1.) Men and women alike cite crime as their number-one concern (16 percent vs. 15 percent). Ideologically, moderates cite crime (18 percent), liberals cite poverty and homelessness (15 percent), and conservatives cite high taxes (17 percent).

Americans with bachelor's or postgraduate degrees cite high taxes as their top concern (15 percent), while those without a college degree cite crime (17 percent). Relatedly, Americans with higher incomes are more likely to cite high taxes as their number-one concern, while those earning less are more concerned about crime. Among Americans earning at least \$150,000, 18 percent say high taxes are their greatest concern, while 21 percent of those earning less than \$25,000 say they are more worried about local crime.

Community Safety and Feelings of Security.

Americans do not always feel secure in their

neighborhoods, but feelings of personal safety vary widely. About only half (53 percent) the public say they would feel very or somewhat comfortable leaving the door unlocked while they are home. Nearly half (47 percent) say they would not be comfortable leaving their door unlocked.

Americans express somewhat greater comfort in walking around their neighborhoods after dark, but many would not. Two-thirds (66 percent) say they would feel comfortable taking a neighborhood walk after dark by themselves. One in three (33 percent) Americans say they would not feel comfortable doing this.

Feelings of safety and security are notably lower in urban areas and much higher in smaller towns and rural communities. City size is especially important. Only slightly more than half (53 percent) of Americans living in a big city say they would be comfortable taking a solo walk at night. Forty-eight percent of big-city residents say they would not. In small cities, more than six in 10 (63 percent) Americans report being comfortable taking a walk at night by themselves. At least six in 10 Americans living in big-city suburbs (65 percent), rural areas (70 percent), smaller towns (73 percent), and small-city suburbs (75 percent) say they would feel comfortable walking by themselves at night.

Americans in more densely inhabited places are also much less willing to leave their doors unlocked. Only 35 percent of Americans living in big cities say they would be comfortable leaving their doors unlocked, compared to 69 percent of rural residents.

There is a notable gender gap on feelings of security while walking alone at night. Over three-quarters (77 percent) of men report feeling very or somewhat comfortable taking a walk alone after dark, compared to just over half (56 percent) of women.

There are notable generational divisions among men and women. Only 40 percent of young women say they feel comfortable walking by themselves at night, compared to 57 percent of senior women. Senior men are also much more likely than young men are to report feeling comfortable walking around their neighborhoods at night (82 percent vs. 64 percent, respectively).

Racial gaps immediately stand out when looking at Americans' sense of safety and security in their own communities (Figure 2). Seventy-four percent of White Americans say they are comfortable walking alone after dark, compared to 41 percent of Black, 55 percent of Hispanic, and 62 percent of Asian Americans. Black Americans are more than twice as likely as White Americans are to say they feel uncomfortable walking

alone in their neighborhoods after dark (58 percent vs. 26 percent).

A similar racial gap is evident in views about keeping the door unlocked. A majority (62 percent) of White Americans feel comfortable leaving their doors unlocked while they are home. Less than half of Black (33 percent), Hispanic (39 percent), and Asian (34 percent) Americans say the same. Notably, only 10 percent of Black Americans feel very comfortable leaving their doors unlocked.

Another gap on safety runs across party lines. Roughly six in 10 (61 percent) Republicans and less than half (45 percent) of Democrats say they would feel comfortable leaving their doors unlocked. Republicans also express less concern about walking by themselves at night; about three-quarters (76 percent) of Republicans compared to 60 percent of Democrats say they would be at least somewhat comfortable doing this.

Gender differences are apparent within political parties. Eighty-six percent of Republican men report feeling comfortable walking alone at night, including 55 percent who are very comfortable. Among Democratic men, 72 percent say they feel at least somewhat comfortable walking alone at night, but only 37 percent report feeling very comfortable doing this.

Republican women are more likely than Democratic women are to feel safe taking a solo walk after dark. Over six in 10 Republican women say they would be very (29 percent) or somewhat (36 percent) comfortable walking alone in their neighborhood after dark. Just over half of Democratic women say they would be very (19 percent) or somewhat (33 percent) comfortable doing the same.

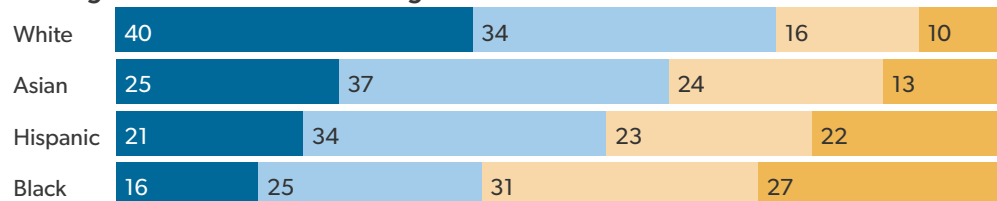
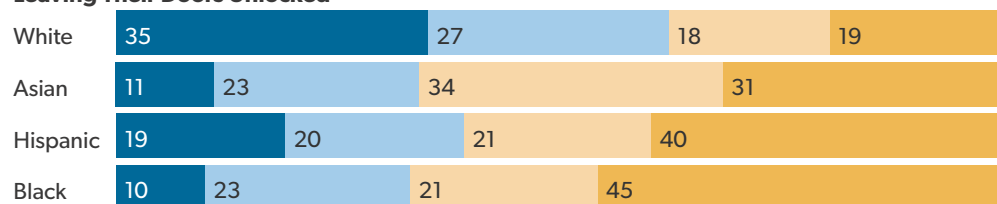
Given the much higher concentration of Republicans in rural areas and disproportionately high number of Democrats in larger metropolitan areas, it's worth examining whether partisan differences in feelings of safety are mostly driven by location. Such does not seem to be the case. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Republicans living in large cities say they feel at least somewhat comfortable walking around their neighborhoods in the dark by themselves; about only half (49 percent) of Democrats living in large cities feel the same.

Married people also generally feel safer than singles do. Three-quarters (75 percent) of those who are married feel somewhat or very safe walking alone at night, compared to 61 percent of divorced people, 56 percent of singles, and 58 percent of cohabitants. Six in 10 (60 percent) married people say they are comfortable leaving their doors unlocked, compared to 42 percent of

Figure 2. White Americans Report Greater Feelings of Safety and Security in Their Neighborhoods

Percentage who say they are comfortable or uncomfortable . . .

■ Very Comfortable
 ■ Somewhat Comfortable
 ■ Somewhat Uncomfortable
 ■ Very Uncomfortable

Walking Alone After Dark in Their Neighborhood**Leaving Their Doors Unlocked**

Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

singles, which perhaps also reflects their higher trust levels. More than half (57 percent) of those who are married believe people can be trusted, compared to 40 percent of singles and 35 percent of cohabitants.

Safety of Drinking Water. Many Americans do not feel comfortable drinking unfiltered water in their homes. Nearly half (47 percent) of Americans say they would be uncomfortable doing this, while 54 percent of the public say they would be at least somewhat comfortable consuming unfiltered tap water.

There are also large racial differences regarding tap water (Figure 3). More than six in 10 (62 percent) White Americans say they would be comfortable drinking water straight from their own taps, but far fewer Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans feel the same. Less than half of Asian (44 percent), Hispanic (40 percent), and Black Americans (30 percent) say they feel comfortable drinking unfiltered water out of the faucet. Sixty-nine percent of Black Americans say the prospect of drinking unfiltered tap water makes them uncomfortable.

Trust in Law Enforcement, Police Funding, and Support for Community Policing. Against the backdrop of the national debate about police funding over

the past year, it is important to understand different aspects of Americans' views about the police.

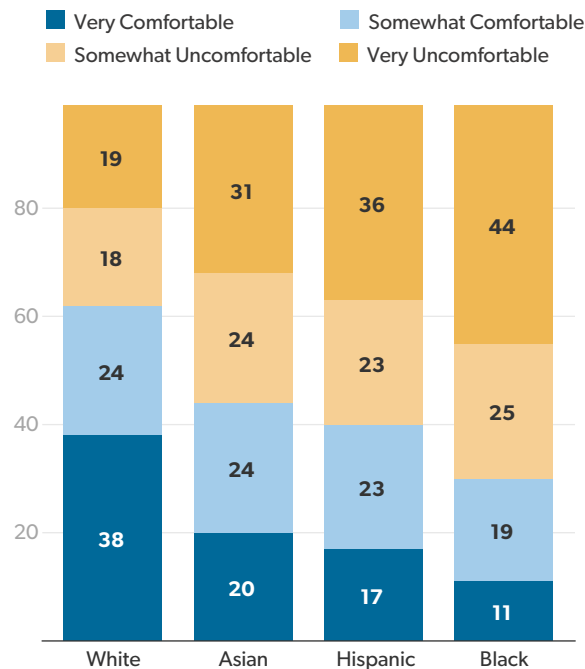
Americans continue to express mostly positive views about the police. Although public trust in many public institutions has been declining for several decades, most Americans retain confidence in their local police.² Nearly three-quarters of Americans report having a great deal (23 percent) or a fair amount (51 percent) of confidence in the local police to do what's right. About only one in four (26 percent) say they do not have much or any confidence in the local police.

Not only do Americans largely trust their local police force, but most Americans say they want a greater police presence in their communities. Seventy percent of Americans say they favor having police more regularly patrol their neighborhoods. Twenty-nine percent of Americans oppose an increased police presence.

As local and national political leaders debate police reform initiatives in response to rising concerns about abuse, most Americans do not support cutting police budgets and diverting resources to social services. Thirty-seven percent of Americans express support for cutting funding for local law enforcement and diverting funds to social services. More than six in 10 (62 percent) Americans oppose this idea, including 35 percent who strongly oppose it.

Figure 3. Few Black Americans Feel Very Comfortable Drinking Tap Water at Home

Percentage who say they are comfortable or uncomfortable with drinking unfiltered tap water in their home



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Race and Policing. The backdrop to much of this divide concerns perceptions of the police's treatment of minorities. Most Americans believe that police officers treat Black Americans and other minorities differently than they treat White Americans. Less than half (38 percent) of the public believes police officers generally treat Americans equally regardless of racial or ethnic background. More than six in 10 (61 percent) Americans disagree.

Perhaps not surprisingly, support for defunding police is higher among Black Americans. More than half (53 percent) of Black Americans support cutting funding for police, along with 49 percent of Asian, 40 percent of Hispanic, and 31 percent of White Americans (Figure 4). Still, more than four in 10 (44 percent) Black Americans oppose policies that would reduce police budgets and shift resources to social services.

What's more, at least six in 10 Americans across different racial groups want more regular policing of their own communities, including 60 percent of Asian, 66 percent of Black, 69 percent of White, and 76 percent of Hispanic Americans. Notably, no group expresses more intense

support than do Black Americans. Twenty-nine percent of Black Americans strongly favor increased policing, compared to 24 percent of Hispanic and 17 percent of both White and Asian Americans.

When it comes to perceptions of local law enforcement, trust among Black Americans remains robust, albeit somewhat lower than among other groups. Fifty-seven percent of Black, 58 percent of Asian, and 64 percent of Hispanic Americans trust the police in their communities at least a fair amount, compared to 81 percent of White adults.

The Politics of Police Funding. When it comes to police funding and presence in the neighborhood, ideological divides are wider than racial ones are. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of liberals favor cutting police funding, compared to 36 percent of moderates and 13 percent of conservatives. One-third (33 percent) of liberals strongly favor such cuts.

At the same time, a majority (54 percent) of liberals favor having more police regularly patrol their neighborhoods, although considerably less than the 71 percent of moderates and 81 percent of conservatives who say the same. These figures are consistent with trust in police. While 86 percent of conservatives and 73 percent of moderates trust the police in their local communities, 59 percent of liberals say the same.

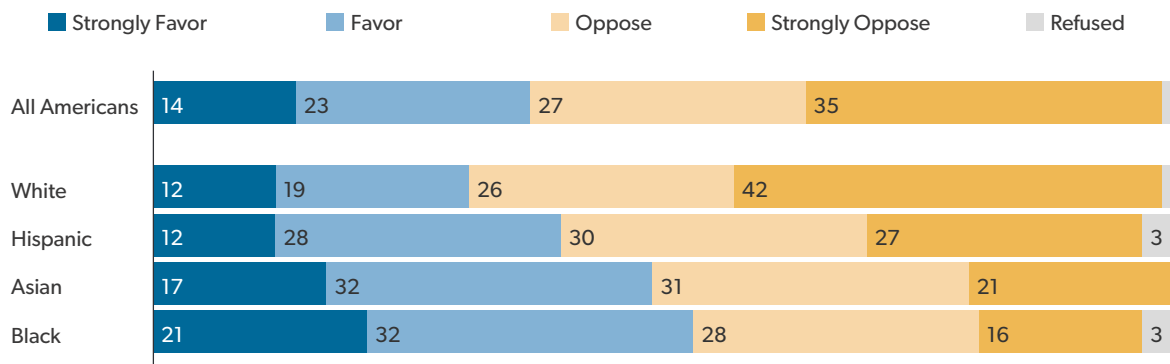
Feeling Welcome in Your Neighborhood. Overall, the vast majority of Americans feel welcome in their neighborhoods. Nearly eight in 10 (78 percent) say they feel welcome pretty much everywhere in their neighborhoods or local area. However, more than one in five (21 percent) Americans say there are certain places where they live that they do not feel welcome.

There are significant racial disparities. (See Figure 5.) A third (33 percent) of Black Americans say there are certain places in their neighborhoods or local area where they do not feel welcome. Twenty-eight percent of Asian Americans and 24 percent of Hispanic Americans say the same. Fewer than two in 10 (17 percent) White Americans say there are places in their communities where they do not feel welcome.

Feelings of belonging are also stratified by income. Americans making less than \$25,000 a year are much more likely to report feeling unwelcome in certain parts of their neighborhoods or local area than are those with annual incomes of \$150,000 or greater (31 percent vs. 13 percent, respectively). Lower-income Black Americans are the most likely to feel unwelcome. Nearly four in 10

Figure 4. Most Americans Oppose Cutting Police Funding

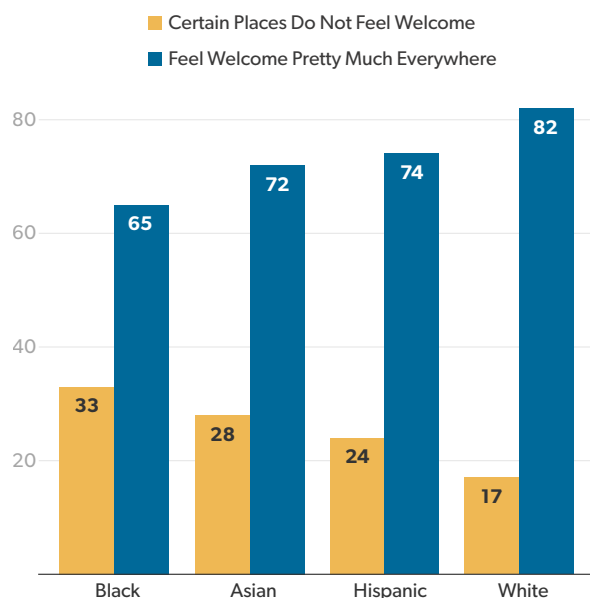
Percentage who support or oppose cutting some funding from police departments in their community and shifting it to social services



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Figure 5. One-Third of Black Americans Feel Unwelcome in Certain Parts of Their Communities

Percentage who say in their neighborhood . . .



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

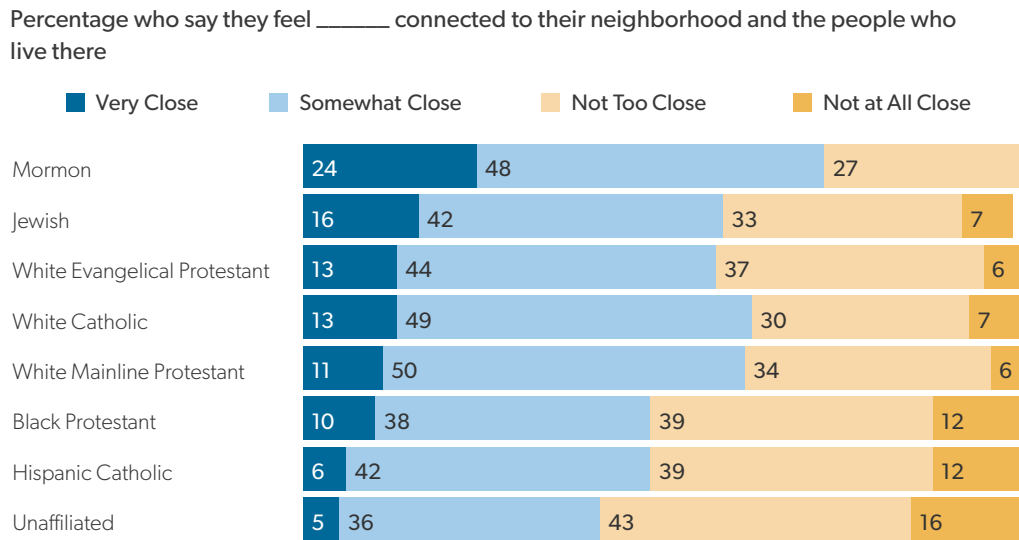
(39 percent) Black Americans making less than \$25,000 a year say there are certain places where they do not feel welcome, compared to 27 percent of White Americans in the same income bracket.

Neighborhood Trust and Connection. Americans are split on whether they feel connected to their communities. Fifty-one percent of Americans say they feel very or somewhat closely connected to their neighborhoods and the people who live there, while 48 percent say they do not feel connected.

There are substantial racial differences in feelings of community connection. A majority (56 percent) of White Americans say they feel at least somewhat closely connected to their neighbors and neighborhoods, but less than half of Black (46 percent), Asian (46 percent), and Hispanic Americans (43 percent) feel the same.

Feelings of neighborhood closeness vary remarkably little across various neighborhood types. About half of Americans living in cities (49 percent) say they feel at least somewhat closely connected to their neighborhoods, compared to over half of those living in suburbs (51 percent), towns (54 percent), and rural areas (55 percent).

What may matter more than where someone lives is how long they have lived there. Americans who have lived for a longer period in their neighborhoods feel more closely connected to them. Nearly six in 10 (59 percent) Americans who have lived at their current addresses for 10 years or longer say they feel closely connected to their neighborhoods, compared to 39 percent of those who have lived there for less than a year. Longevity is particularly important for Americans living in urban neighborhoods. Urban residents who have lived in their neighborhoods for at least 10 years are much more likely to feel close to their neighbors and neighborhoods

Figure 6. Mormons Express the Strongest Connection to Their Communities

Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

than those who have lived there for no more than a year (57 percent vs. 30 percent).

Religious identity and involvement are strongly associated with community attachment. No religious group feels more connected to their neighbors than do Mormons. More than seven in 10 (72 percent) Mormons say they feel at least somewhat closely connected to the people who live in their communities, including 24 percent who feel very close. A majority of White Catholics (62 percent), White mainline Protestants (61 percent), Jews (58 percent), and White evangelical Protestants (57 percent) say they feel at least somewhat connected to their neighbors and neighborhoods. Less than half of Hispanic Catholics (48 percent) and Black Protestants (48 percent) say the same. Religiously unaffiliated Americans feel the least connected; only 41 percent say they feel connected to their neighbors. (See Figure 6.)

While certain religious groups are more likely than others to report stronger connections to their neighborhood, across religious traditions, Americans who report higher levels of religious participation feel more attached to their communities and the people in them. Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) adults who are members of a local church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other house of worship report feeling close to their neighborhoods and neighbors, compared to less than half (46 percent) of those who are not members. Similarly, Americans who

attend religious services at least once a week express greater attachment to their neighborhoods than do those who never attend (62 percent vs. 40 percent).

Despite the lack of connection many Americans feel to their neighbors, most believe their neighbors are willing to lend a helping hand. Eight in 10 Americans say their neighbors would be very (27 percent) or fairly willing (53 percent) to help the people in their area. Only 20 percent say their neighbors would be not too or not at all willing.

While urban residents feel about as connected to their neighborhoods as those living in rural areas do, they are less likely to say their neighbors would be very willing to help others in the neighborhood. More than one-third (35 percent) of rural residents believe their neighbors would be very willing to help people in the area, while only 23 percent of Americans living in cities say the same.

Mormons are distinct in their belief that neighbors would be willing to help out. Nearly half (45 percent) of Mormons say the people living in their area would be very willing to help their neighbors. Thirty-seven percent of Jews also say their neighbors would be very willing to lend a hand to others in the area. Fewer White evangelical Protestants (33 percent), White mainline Protestants (33 percent), White Catholics (32 percent), Hispanic Catholics (27 percent), and Black Protestants (25 percent) believe this. Only 20 percent of religiously unaffiliated

Americans say their neighbors would be very willing to help out people living in their communities.

Although Americans do not always feel closely connected to the people living around them, they generally trust their neighbors to do the right thing. More than seven in 10 (72 percent) Americans say they trust the people in their neighborhoods to do what is right. However, only 15 percent place a great deal of trust in their neighbors in this regard.

There are notable racial differences in the trust Americans have in their neighbors across different geographic areas. Black Americans living in rural areas are particularly distrustful of their neighbors, with 54 percent saying they trust the people in their immediate local area to do the right thing not too much or not at all. White Americans display high levels of trust in their neighbors across urban (77 percent), suburban (79 percent), and rural (79 percent) spaces.

Levels of trust differ markedly across income categories. More than eight in 10 (82 percent) Americans earning at least \$150,000 a year report having a great deal or fair amount of trust in their neighbors, while only 57 percent of those with incomes of less than \$25,000 report this level of trust.

Local Decision-Making. When it comes to neighborhood decisions, few Americans believe they have much say. Only 9 percent of the public believes they have a lot of say when it comes to decisions made about what happens in their neighborhoods. Half (50 percent) believe they have a little say, and about four in 10 (41 percent) report having no say at all.

Young people (age 18–29) are the least likely to believe they have a voice in the decisions affecting their communities. Less than half (48 percent) of young adults say they feel they have at least a little influence on local decision-making. In contrast, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of seniors say they have at least a little say in decisions affecting the neighborhood. More than half (51 percent) of young adults report having no say in neighborhood decisions, compared to only 30 percent of seniors.

Political Communities. Over the past two decades, urban and rural areas have become increasingly politically polarized. Urban areas are trending more liberal and have swung more decisively toward Democratic candidates in national elections, while rural areas are trending toward becoming much more conservative.³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two communities furthest apart on the political spectrum are big cities and rural areas. More than six in 10 (63 percent) Americans living in big cities identify as Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party. Fifteen percent say they are independent, while 21 percent identify as Republican or lean toward the Republican Party. Rural areas lean more toward the right and are more politically diverse than big cities are. About half (49 percent) of rural residents say they are Republican or lean Republican, 16 percent identify as independent, and roughly a third (34 percent) report they are Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party.

Overall, Democrats have more politically homogenous social and familial circles than Republicans have. More than half (51 percent) of Democrats do not have a close friend or family members who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. In contrast, 37 percent of Republicans say they do not have a close friend or immediate family member who voted for Joe Biden.

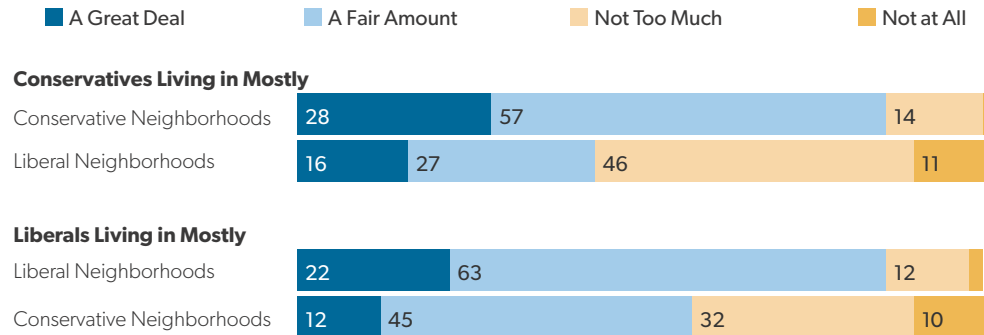
In large metropolitan areas, Democrats are particularly isolated from their political opponents. A majority (55 percent) of Democrats living in large cities say they do not have any close friends or immediate family members who voted for Trump. Predictably, Democrats in rural areas have more politically diverse social networks, but still many lack a close social connection to a Trump voter. A majority (55 percent) of rural Democrats report they have a close friend or immediate family member who voted for Trump, while 46 percent say they do not.

Rural Republicans are less politically isolated than urban Democrats are. About half (51 percent) of Republicans living in rural areas say they have a close friend or family member who voted for Biden, while 46 percent say they do not. Republicans living in big cities have the most politically diverse social and familial circles. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of Republicans in big cities say they have a close friend or family member who voted for Biden. Fewer than three in 10 (28 percent) say they do not have a close friend or family member who did so.

Despite differences in the political diversity between Democrats and Republicans, Americans on both the left and the right report feeling more closely connected to their communities when they live among people who share their political beliefs. Six in 10 (60 percent) liberals who report living in a mostly liberal neighborhood say they feel very or somewhat closely connected to their neighborhoods. For the liberals who say their neighbors hold mostly conservative views, only a third (33 percent) report they feel closely connected to their neighborhoods and the people who live there.

Figure 7. Conservative Americans Living in Liberal Neighborhoods Are the Least Likely to Trust Their Neighbors

Percentage of each group who say they trust their neighbors to do the right thing . . .



Note: The survey included fewer than 100 (N = 79) respondents who identified as conservatives living in a liberal neighborhood. Results should be interpreted with caution. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

A similar pattern can be seen among conservatives. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of conservatives who live in conservative neighborhoods report they feel closely connected to their communities. In contrast, four in 10 (40 percent) conservatives who say their neighbors hold mostly liberal political views report similar levels of connection.⁴

Overall, liberals and conservatives report similar levels of trust in their neighbors. More than seven in 10 liberals (72 percent) and conservatives (75 percent) say they trust the people in their neighborhoods a great deal or a fair amount. However, Americans are more likely to trust their neighbors if they believe they fall on the same side of the political aisle. Eighty-five percent of both liberals and conservatives who say most of their neighbors share their ideology report they trust their neighbors a great deal or a fair amount.

Conservatives living in liberal neighborhoods are the most distrustful. Only 43 percent report they trust their neighbors a great deal or a fair amount.⁵ Over half (57 percent) say they trust their neighbors not too much or not at all. Liberals living in conservative neighborhoods are also distrustful of their neighbors, but to a lesser extent: 57 percent say they trust their neighbors a great deal or a fair amount, and 42 percent say they trust their neighbors not too much or not at all. (See Figure 7.)

Neighborhood Types, Features, and Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Americans across the country to reconsider their priorities when it comes to where they live. Today, many Americans would prefer to live in small towns or rural areas rather than denser urban neighborhoods. Younger Americans show greater interest in suburban living than city living.

After being homebound for many months due to the pandemic, more Americans today express a desire for personal space than ever before. The majority of Americans today are willing to sacrifice easy access to amenities to have more space to themselves and distance from their neighbors.

Where Americans Want to Live. Perhaps driven by idealized visions of rural life—small tight-knit communities that move at a more leisurely pace—many Americans express a preference for rural and small-town life. Roughly four in 10 Americans say they would prefer living in a town (15 percent) or rural area (27 percent). In contrast, only 9 percent say they would prefer to live in a large city. More Americans express interest in living in a small city (16 percent), while one in three Americans prefer the suburbs (33 percent).

Community preferences vary considerably across racial lines. Rural communities are particularly attractive to White Americans. More than one-third (34 percent) of White Americans say they would prefer to live in a rural

Figure 8. Most Americans Say They Would Prefer to Live Elsewhere

Percentage who say if they could live anywhere in the United States, they would prefer to live in the following areas

Current Locale	Would prefer to live in a . . .					
	Big City	Small City	Big-City Suburb	Small-City Suburb	Town	Rural Area
Big City	29	16	23	9	7	15
Small City	8	38	12	11	10	20
Big-City Suburb	7	11	43	15	10	14
Small-City Suburb	4	13	16	35	12	20
Town	5	7	9	12	40	26
Rural Area	2	5	4	6	10	72

Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

area, compared to only 17 percent of Hispanic, 15 percent of Black, and 5 percent of Asian Americans. Asian Americans are distinct in their preferences for suburban living: 61 percent say they would like to live in a suburb of a large or small city.

Americans living in large cities tend to be less enthusiastic about their communities and express greater interest in living elsewhere. In fact, compared to Americans living in other localities, big-city residents are most likely to prefer living in a different type of community (Figure 8). Only 29 percent of Americans living in a big city report this is their preferred place to live. In stark contrast, 72 percent of Americans living in a rural area would choose this type of community if given the option. Thirty-eight percent of Americans living in a small city say this is their preferred community type. Forty percent of Americans living in a small town say this is their ideal location, while 26 percent say they want to live in a rural community. Notably, Americans living in big-city suburbs are more likely to prefer their communities than are Americans living in a suburb of a small city (43 percent vs. 35 percent).

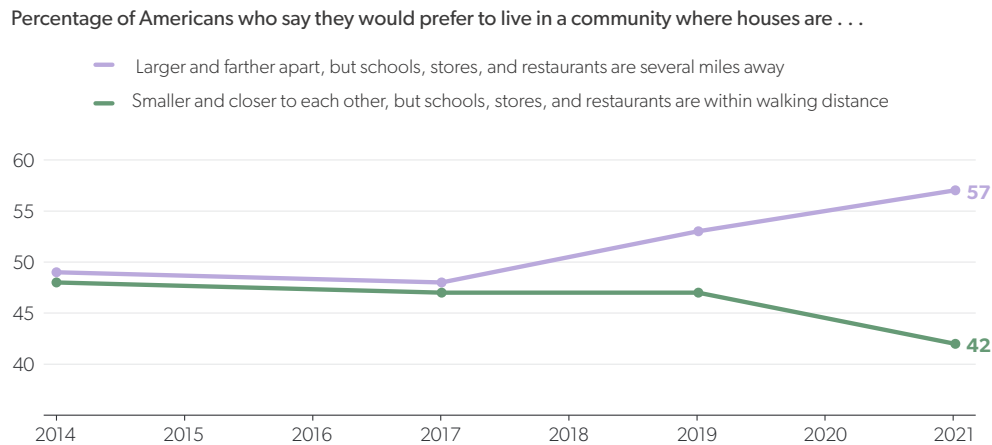
Still, few urban residents are clamoring for the countryside. About one in three (32 percent) Americans living in large cities say they would rather be in the suburbs, while 16 percent say they would prefer a smaller city. Only 15 percent of big-city residents would prefer to live in a rural area.

Living through a global pandemic may have altered neighborhood preferences. Today, Americans are more likely to prioritize personal space over access to community amenities. Most Americans say they would prefer living in a community where the houses are farther apart but schools, stores, and restaurants are several miles away, rather than a community where houses are smaller and closer to each other but schools, stores, and restaurants are within walking distance (57 percent vs. 42 percent).

Neighborhood preferences have changed in recent years, with more Americans expressing a desire for larger houses that are farther apart. (See Figure 9.) In 2017, Americans were about evenly divided over whether they wanted a neighborhood with immediate access to stores, restaurants, and other conveniences or larger houses where these amenities are less conveniently located (47 percent vs. 48 percent).⁶

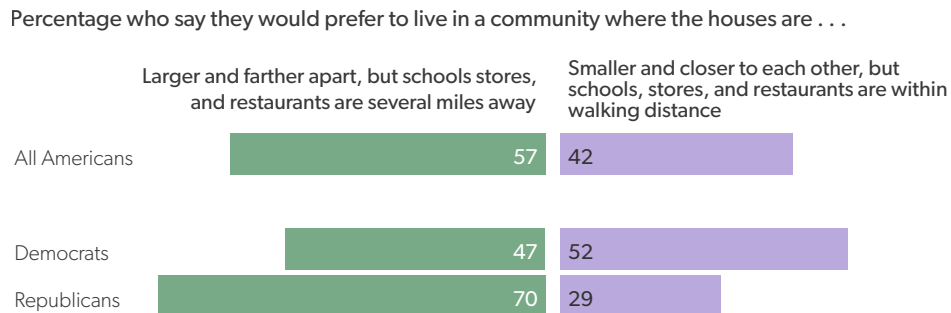
Community preferences also sort Americans along political lines (Figure 10). Seventy percent of Republicans say they would prefer to live in a place with larger houses even if local conveniences—such as stores and restaurants—are less accessible. Democrats are more divided. About half (52 percent) express a preference for communities that have smaller houses, huddled closer together, and amenities nearby. While Democratic men and women are identical in their community preferences, more than a third (36 percent) of Republican women express a preference for communities where amenities

Figure 9. Americans Today Prioritize Space over Amenity Access



Note: The original question wording from Pew Research Center contained the phrase “Imagine for a moment that you are moving to another community.” The figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: Pew Research Center, 2014, 2017, 2019; and American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Figure 10. Partisan Divide over Community Preference



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

are more accessible, compared to less than a quarter (24 percent) of Republican men.

Democrats living in rural areas have preferences distinct from their co-partisans. These rural Democrats (68 percent) are just as likely, if not more likely, than are Republicans living in cities (66 percent), suburbs (67 percent), and towns (63 percent) to prefer communities with larger houses that are farther apart from their neighbors. Less than half of Democrats living in cities (39 percent) and suburbs (48 percent) prefer living in this type of community. Republicans living in rural areas are the most likely to prefer living in a community with space. Roughly eight in 10 (82 percent) say they would prefer to live in a community with space over one with easy access to amenities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Americans with children are much more inclined to prioritize space over amenity access. This preference is evident among both fathers and mothers. More than six in 10 fathers (69 percent) and mothers (62 percent) say they would prefer a neighborhood with larger houses that are farther from their neighbors. Fewer men (56 percent) and women (50 percent) without children say they would prefer to live in a larger house farther away from amenities.

Single Americans are more likely to value easy access to amenities. About half (49 percent) of both single men and women would prefer to live in a community where amenities are more accessible but houses are smaller and closer together.

Wealthy Americans Prefer the Suburbs but Value Amenity Access. The highest- and lowest-income Americans share a preference for smaller houses with greater access to local amenities. Nearly half of Americans making less than \$25,000 a year (47 percent) and those with annual incomes of \$150,000 or greater (49 percent) say they would rather live in a neighborhood where houses are smaller and closer together but walkable to shops and restaurants. In contrast, Americans who fall between these income categories prefer larger houses farther apart. For instance, only 37 percent of Americans making between \$50,000 and \$75,000 say they want to live in more densely populated areas.

At the same time, wealthy Americans are unique in their desire for suburban living. Nearly half (48 percent) of those with household incomes of \$150,000 or greater say they would like to live in a suburb of a large or small city. In contrast, only 27 percent of Americans making less than \$25,000 a year say they would prefer to live in the suburbs.

Sidewalk Connections. Sidewalks are fairly common in most American neighborhoods. Nearly half (47 percent) of Americans report having sidewalks running directly in front of their homes, and more than one in five (22 percent) say there are sidewalks near their homes but not directly in front. Three in 10 (30 percent) Americans live in places without sidewalks nearby.

Predictably, sidewalks are much more common in more urban areas, but there are notable differences in the presence of suburban sidewalks between those living near large and small cities. More than nine in 10 (91 percent) Americans living in a big city report having sidewalks running directly in front of their homes or nearby. Eighty-two percent of those living in a small city also report having sidewalks in front of or close to their homes.

The presence of sidewalks also differs significantly between suburbs of larger and smaller cities. Eighty-seven percent of Americans living in the suburb of a large city report having sidewalks immediately outside their homes or nearby, compared to 67 percent living in a small-city suburb. About one in three (34 percent) Americans living in a small-city suburb say there are no sidewalks where they live. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of Americans living in rural areas say there are no sidewalks in their immediate vicinity.

Access to sidewalks is associated with increased frequency of walking. A majority (55 percent) of Americans who report having sidewalks running directly in front of

their homes or nearby say they walk around their neighborhoods at least once a week. About four in 10 (41 percent) Americans without sidewalks report doing the same. Sidewalks appear to particularly affect the frequency of neighborhood walks in suburban communities. Roughly six in 10 (61 percent) Americans living in the suburbs with sidewalks in front of or nearby their homes say they walk around their communities at least once a week.

Sidewalks appear to encourage suburban Americans to visit local outdoor spaces. About a third (34 percent) of suburban residents who report having sidewalks immediately in front of their homes or nearby report spending time at a local park, playground, dog park, or community garden at least once a week. About only one-fifth (21 percent) of suburban residents who do not report having a sidewalk visit outdoor community spaces with the same frequency.

Community News and Engagement. In the era of declining local news, relatively few Americans report paying close attention to news about their local communities. Only 19 percent of Americans say they follow news about their communities very closely. About half (46 percent) say they follow local news somewhat closely. More than one-third (34 percent) say they do not pay much or any attention to news about their local communities.

Young adults are particularly tuned out from local news. Less than half report paying very close (9 percent) or somewhat close (38 percent) attention to news about their communities. More than half (52 percent) do not follow local news. In contrast, older Americans are much more avid consumers of local news. Eight in 10 (80 percent) seniors say they follow the news closely, including about one in three (31 percent) who follow it very closely.

Black Americans show notable interest in local news. Nearly three in 10 (28 percent) Black Americans say they follow local news very closely, compared to 19 percent of White, 17 percent of Hispanic, and 12 percent of Asian Americans. Black Americans also express a heightened interest in national politics. While just over a quarter (26 percent) of all Americans say they follow news about national politics very closely, roughly a third (32 percent) of Black Americans say the same. Twenty-seven percent of White, 20 percent of Hispanic, and 17 percent of Asian Americans also say they follow national political news very closely.

Importantly, different community types have no significant differences in local news consumption. Americans living in rural areas do not follow news about their communities any more closely than do those who live in cities or

suburbs. Over six in 10 Americans living in cities (66 percent), suburbs (64 percent), and rural areas (66 percent) say they follow local news at least somewhat closely.

Why Americans Follow Local News. Americans use local news for information about happenings in their communities, but the topics of interest vary considerably. No local news topic is of greater interest than crime. Over a quarter (26 percent) of Americans say they are most interested in news and information about crime in their area. Twenty-two percent of the public says they are most interested in information about community activities, festivals, and other goings-on. Fewer Americans cite arts and culture (10 percent) as their primary interests. An identical number (10 percent) say they're primarily interested in things to buy and sell. Seven percent of Americans say the local news topic they care most about is real estate, while 5 percent say they are most interested in sports and 4 percent say local jobs and employment opportunities.

Black and Hispanic Americans express more interest in local crime than other Americans do. More than three in 10 Black (36 percent) and Hispanic (32 percent) Americans cite local crime as the local news topic of greatest interest to them. Only 23 percent of White Americans and 18 percent of Asian Americans say they are most interested in local crime news. White Americans show the greatest interest in community activities (27 percent), while Asian Americans show a unique interest in local real estate. About one in five (19 percent) Asian Americans say real estate is the local news topic of greatest interest to them.

Men and women are about equally likely to say they are most interested in information about local crime (25 percent vs. 28 percent, respectively). But women express far more interest in neighborhood activities and events. Twenty-seven percent of women, compared to 17 percent of men, say they are most interested in local news topics focused on local gatherings and community events. Men express a greater interest in news about local sports (9 percent vs. 2 percent).

Trust in Local News. Public confidence in the news industry has fallen in recent years.⁷ Less than half of Americans say they have a great deal (6 percent) or a fair amount (43 percent) of trust in local news media to do the right thing. More than half (51 percent) report they have little or no confidence in local news outlets.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Americans with greater trust in local news media are more likely to follow it closely. Nearly half (47 percent) of Americans who say they have a great deal of trust in the local news media report

following news about their local communities very closely. Just 20 percent of Americans who trust the local media a fair amount say they follow local news to a similar degree. Fewer Americans who have little (16 percent) or no trust (16 percent) in the local news media say the same.

Lack of trust in local news is evident in both cities and rural areas. Nearly half (49 percent) of Americans living in big cities and 43 percent of those in rural communities say they have a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in their local news organizations. Trust is somewhat higher among residents of big-city suburbs; 54 percent report having at least a fair amount of confidence in their local news.

There is a clear partisan divide in trust of local news media. Two-thirds (66 percent) of Democrats say they trust the local news media, compared to just 36 percent of Republicans. More than six in 10 (63 percent) Republicans have little or no trust in the local news media to do what is right.

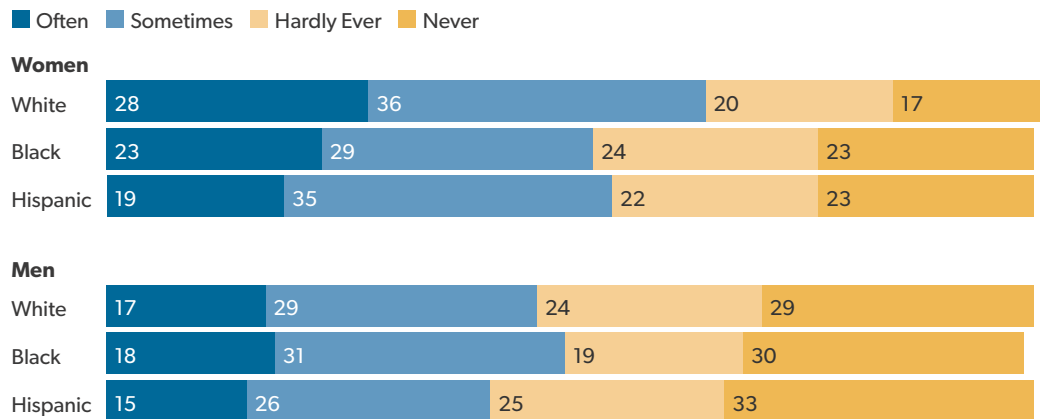
Republicans' lack of trust in the local news media is consistent regardless of where they live. Republicans in cities (37 percent), suburbs (35 percent), towns (41 percent), and rural areas (35 percent) all report they trust the local news media a great deal or fair amount. Notably, Republicans from blue states (those that voted for Biden in the 2020 presidential election) are more distrustful of local news media than those living in red states (those that voted for Trump). Forty-three percent of Republicans living in red states say they trust the local news media a great deal or fair amount, compared to only 29 percent of Republicans living in blue states.

The length of time Americans have lived in their communities appears to have little impact on their trust in local news. Those who have been at their current address for 10 or more years are no more likely than those who have lived in the same place for less than one year to say they trust the local news media a great deal or a fair amount (51 percent vs. 50 percent). Americans who have lived at their current address for one to two years are the most distrustful of local news, with only 42 percent saying they trust the local news media a great deal or fair amount.

Online Community Forums. Local news outlets are not the only way Americans receive information about happenings in their communities. Many Americans get news and information about their communities from online forums such as Facebook groups and Nextdoor. Overall, 21 percent of Americans say they often receive news this way, while another 32 percent say they sometimes use these platforms. Forty-six percent of Americans say they

Figure 11. White Women Are the Most Likely to Turn to Online Forums for Local News

Percentage who say they get local news and information from local online forums or discussion groups, such as Facebook or Nextdoor . . .



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

hardly ever or never use these platforms to get local news and information.

Women use these platforms more frequently than men do, but there are notable generational divisions as well. Sixty percent of women say they often or sometimes use online forums for news about their local community, compared to 45 percent of men. The gap is even wider among young people; 53 percent of young women but only 29 percent of young men report using local forums and discussion groups to acquire news and information about their communities. Older women are the most frequent users of these sites. More than six in 10 women age 50–64 (64 percent) and 65 and up (62 percent) say they often or sometimes get local news from online social platforms such as Facebook and Nextdoor.

Racial differences among women are evident as well. White women are far more active on these local social forums than Hispanic or Black women are. Sixty-four percent of White women say they often or sometimes use these local forums, compared to 54 percent of Hispanic women and 52 percent of Black women. (See Figure 11.)

Community Leaders. In many communities, someone will take on an informal role coordinating activities and events and connecting people in the neighborhood—a “community leader.” Nearly four in 10 (37 percent) Americans say they personally know someone in their communities who regularly coordinates activities and

events. More than six in 10 (63 percent) Americans say they do not know such a person.

There are few differences across religious traditions in knowing a community leader, with two important exceptions. Mormons and Jews are unique among religious Americans in their connections to community leaders. A majority of Mormons (58 percent) and Jews (53 percent) say they personally know someone who is engaged in organizing social activities and events in the neighborhood.

Community leaders are not unique to any one type of neighborhood. Americans living in big cities are about as likely to know someone who regularly organizes neighborhood activities and events as those living in rural areas (35 percent vs. 38 percent).

Of Americans who say they personally know a community leader, a subset of respondents were asked to describe this person in greater detail. Many described their neighborhood leader as a member of the homeowners association, a local business owner, or a volunteer who plans holiday events, picnics, and potlucks.

One 31-year-old woman says her neighbor Jessica is an advocate for the community: “She sits on the board of the neighborhood organization, helps to organize neighborhood events, is adept at getting to know lots of neighbors, and advocates for the neighborhood with local politicians.”

Another respondent—a 26-year-old man—describes his community leader as someone who is passionate

about the community: “They’re involved in organizing things like community 5Ks and county fairs and stuff like that. They’re really friendly with everyone and proud of their community, so they like to do stuff like that.”

Some Americans have more intimate connections to the neighborhood’s community leader. One 65-year-old man says, “My wife organizes block parties most summers and sets out US flags in front of each house on our block on July 4th and Memorial Day.” Another respondent describes her father as the neighborhood’s local leader: “My dad. At 75 he still represents Vietnam vets by being on several boards, fundraises for Special Olympics, and is a substitute teacher.”

Knowing a community leader may help people feel connected to their communities and the people who live there. Americans who personally know someone who is active in their communities report feeling more closely connected to their neighborhoods. Nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) Americans who personally know someone who is active in their communities say they feel closely connected to their neighborhoods and the people who live there, compared to 41 percent of those who do not know such a person.

Neighborhood Amenities and Third Places

For many Americans, the pandemic scrambled many long-held personal priorities, including where to live, the amount of space required, and the features their neighborhoods offer. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Americans appear to want more space for themselves and their families, but most still appear to value access to parks, local restaurants, and coffeehouses. Being stuck at home for an extended period gave many Americans an opportunity to more fully appreciate “third places”—local spots where they spend time when they are not at work or home.⁸ A majority of Americans have their own third places in their communities where they spend time, socialize, and connect with their neighbors.

The Importance of Neighborhood Amenities.

Access to neighborhood amenities has previously been shown to play an important role in connecting people to their communities, increasing feelings of belonging and reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation.⁹ This survey aimed to identify the types of amenities Americans have access to in their communities, including restaurants, bars, and coffee shops; places of entertainment; parks or other green spaces; community

centers and libraries; places to buy groceries; and gyms or fitness centers.

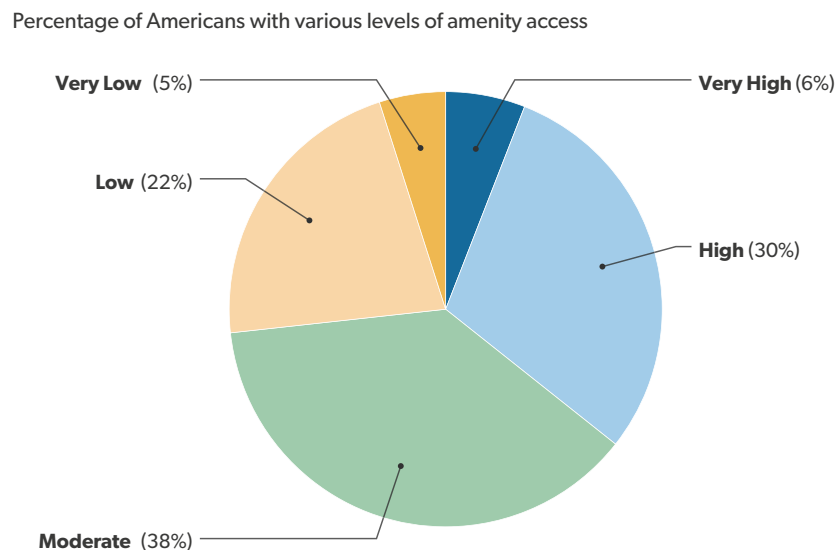
Many Americans live close to at least some local amenities. More than half of Americans (55 percent) live less than 10 minutes by car from their favorite restaurant, bar, or coffee shop, with 14 percent saying they live within walking distance of their favorite eatery or place to get drinks. Fewer Americans live as close to their favorite place of entertainment, such as a movie theater, music performance space, and bowling alley. While 32 percent say they live less than 10 minutes from their favorite entertainment venue, only 6 percent say they are within walking distance of this place.

The majority (70 percent) of Americans live a short distance from a local park, community garden, or recreation area, including 34 percent who live within walking distance of such a green space. A community center or library is also close to many Americans. Sixty-five percent of Americans live within 10 minutes of a community center or library, with 18 percent saying they live within walking distance. A similar number of Americans (61 percent) say they live within 10 minutes of the nearest gym, fitness center, or indoor recreation center, with 15 percent reporting they can walk there.

Most Americans live fairly close to the place they usually buy groceries. The majority (77 percent) of Americans live 10 minutes or less from a grocery store, corner market, or place they regularly buy groceries. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) say they live within walking distance of their regular market or grocery store.

To better comprehend the range of different neighborhood amenities, we re-created the Neighborhood Amenity Index, a scale first developed in a 2019 report, “The Importance of Place: Neighborhood Amenities as a Source of Social Connection and Trust.”¹⁰ This scale collapses six distinct measures of neighborhood amenity proximity into five discrete categories, with lower scores corresponding to access to more amenities and higher scores corresponding to limited access to amenities.

The results suggest that having access to local amenities is fairly typical. More than a third of Americans live in neighborhoods with either very high (6 percent) or high (30 percent) amenity access. Living in a moderate-amenity neighborhood is also common, with 38 percent of Americans today living in such neighborhoods. More than one in four Americans live in areas with less amenity access. Twenty-two percent of Americans live in low-amenity neighborhoods, and 5 percent live in very-low-amenity neighborhoods. (See Figure 12.)

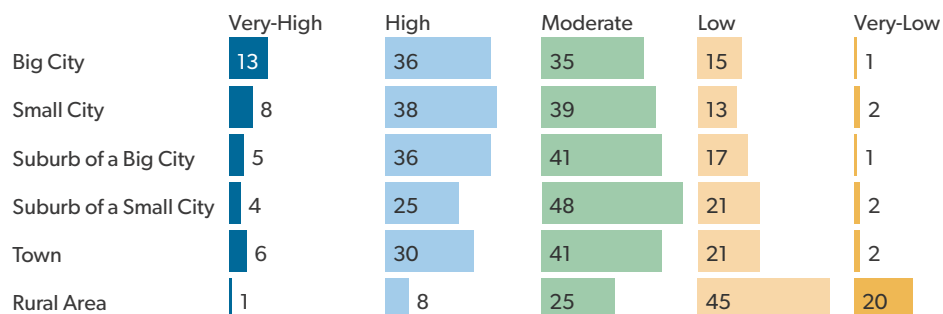
Figure 12. Access to Neighborhood Amenities

Note: The figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Figure 13. Amenity Access Varies by Community Type

Percentage who live in high-, moderate-, and low-amenity areas



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Neighborhood Amenities and Urbanity. Americans living in cities and other highly urbanized areas generally have greater access to local commercial and public spaces, but even in these population-dense areas, amenity access varies widely (Figure 13). Less than half (49 percent) of big-city residents live in high-amenity areas. Thirty-five percent live in places with moderate amenity access, and 16 percent reside in low-amenity areas.

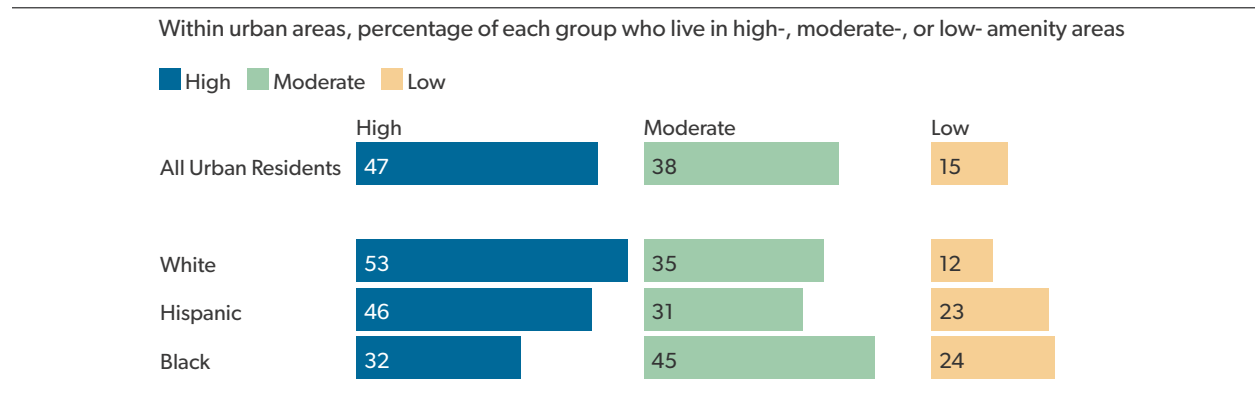
Similarly, many Americans in smaller towns still live close to community amenities. Thirty-six percent of residents of smaller towns live in high-amenity areas, while 41 percent are in communities with moderate amenity

access. Less than one-quarter (24 percent) of Americans living in smaller towns are in low-amenity communities. Notably, Americans in large-city suburbs are more likely to live in high-amenity areas than small-city suburbanites are (41 percent vs. 29 percent).

Americans living in rural areas are much more geographically separated from public and commercial spaces. Two-thirds (66 percent) of rural residents live in low- or very-low-amenity areas, while just 9 percent live in high- or very-high-amenity areas.

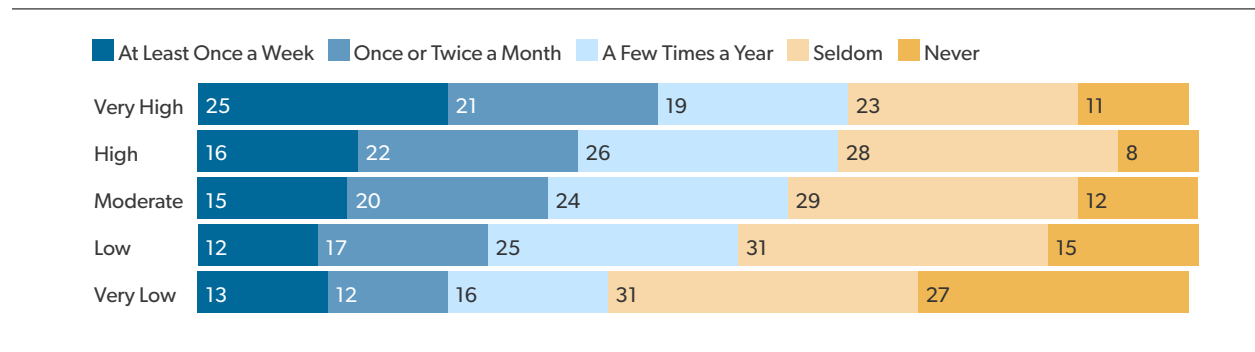
Amenity access is also highly stratified by race and ethnic background (Figure 14). Black Americans are the

Figure 14. In Urban Areas, Black Americans Are Twice as Likely as White Americans Are to Lack Neighborhood Amenities



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

Figure 15. Americans Living in High-Amenity Areas Are More Likely to Strike Up Conversations with Strangers



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

most likely to live in low- or very-low-amenity areas. A third (33 percent) of Black Americans live in neighborhoods with low or very low access to amenities, compared to roughly a quarter of White (26 percent) and Hispanic (25 percent) Americans. Only 14 percent of Asian Americans live in low- or very-low-amenity neighborhoods.

The racial gap in amenity access is especially pronounced in urban areas. A majority (53 percent) of urban White residents have high amenity access in their neighborhoods, compared to only 32 percent of Black Americans living in urban communities.

Why Neighborhood Amenities Matter. Access to neighborhood amenities holds importance beyond general convenience. Living in higher-amenity areas appears to encourage greater community engagement and activity. Sixty percent of Americans living in very-high-amenity

areas and 45 percent of those living in high-amenity areas report walking around their neighborhoods at least a couple times a week. Americans living in very-high-amenity areas are over three times as likely as those living in low-amenity areas to say they have a local spot they go to regularly (75 percent vs. 23 percent).

Amenity-rich areas are also associated with higher levels of sociability. Nearly half (46 percent) of those living in very-high-amenity communities report having a conversation with someone in their communities they did not know well at least once a month. In contrast, only one-quarter (25 percent) of those living in very-low-amenity areas report this level of engagement with people in their local area (Figure 15).

Americans living in higher-amenity areas appear to be more in tune with local community happenings. The vast majority (76 percent) of those in very-high-amenity

areas say they follow news about their local communities closely—more than those living in moderate-amenity (66 percent) and very-low-amenity (61 percent) areas. Those living in higher-amenity areas are also somewhat more likely than those in lower-amenity areas are to use online forums or discussion groups to get local news and information. A majority of those living in high-amenity (56 percent) or very-high-amenity (54 percent) places report using Facebook groups or Nextdoor for local news and information at least sometimes. In contrast, less than half of those in low-amenity (48 percent) or very-low-amenity (47 percent) neighborhoods report using such platforms with the same frequency.

Access to neighborhood amenities may also play an important role in mitigating social isolation and loneliness. Americans living in very-high-amenity (66 percent), high-amenity (71 percent), and moderate-amenity areas (69 percent) are more likely than are those in low-amenity (60 percent) and very-low-amenity areas (59 percent) to say they rarely or never feel like there is nowhere they really belong. Those in higher-amenity areas are also more likely to report feeling they have people they can turn to. About seven in 10 Americans living in very-high-amenity (67 percent) and high-amenity areas (71 percent) say they feel there are people they can turn to often or very often. In comparison, 66 percent of those in moderate-amenity areas, 57 percent of those in low-amenity areas, and 54 percent of those very-low-amenity areas say the same.

Finally, people living in high-amenity neighborhoods feel considerably safer walking alone after dark than do those in places with sparser amenity levels. With each increasing level in the amenity index, a sense of personal safety increases. For example, 74 percent of people living in very-high-amenity areas feel somewhat or very comfortable walking by themselves at night, compared to 58 percent of those in very-low-amenity areas.

Suburban and Urban Amenity Benefits. Regardless of where Americans live, being closer to coffee shops, parks, libraries, and restaurants is associated with a range of positive social outcomes. However, in some instances, the benefits of amenity access are even larger in suburban and urban areas.

Americans who live in places with more amenities nearby generally rate their communities more positively than do those with fewer public and commercial spaces. But the difference is striking among suburban residents. Forty-three percent of high-amenity suburbanites say their communities are an excellent place to live, compared

to only 22 percent of Americans living in low-amenity suburbs. In contrast, among those living in rural areas and smaller towns, there is only a modest difference between the high-amenity and low-amenity residents in reporting their communities are excellent (36 percent vs. 28 percent).

Having local restaurants, bars, parks, and coffee shops close by is particularly important for establishing community connections in urban areas. Among urban residents, amenity proximity is strongly correlated with feeling connected to the neighborhood. A majority (55 percent) of high-amenity urbanites feel closely connected to their neighbors, compared to 43 percent of those in low-amenity neighborhoods. High-amenity urbanites are more likely than those in low-amenity urban areas are to say neighbors are willing to help each other out (83 percent vs. 70 percent). There are no significant differences in views of Americans in smaller towns and rural communities between those living in higher-amenity neighborhoods and those living in lower-amenity neighborhoods (86 percent vs. 81 percent).

Americans living in high-amenity suburbs are far more likely to say they feel their voices are heard in decisions made about the neighborhood. Two-thirds (66 percent) of high-amenity suburbanites say they feel they have at least a little say in local decision-making, while just over half (51 percent) of those in low-amenity areas say the same.

For Americans living in urban and suburban areas, greater amenity access is linked to higher levels of social trust. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of high-amenity urbanites trust their neighbors at least a fair amount, compared to 62 percent of those living in low-amenity areas. Similarly, suburban residents in high-amenity neighborhoods are much more likely to say they have a fair amount or a great deal of trust in their neighbors (77 percent vs. 60 percent). This is not true of people living in smaller towns and rural areas. Similar numbers of those living in high-amenity (77 percent) and low-amenity (72 percent) towns and rural areas say they trust their neighbors at least a fair amount.

Americans who live in high-amenity areas are also far more likely to say they have people they can turn to if they are facing a problem. Roughly seven in 10 high-amenity urban (70 percent) and suburban (73 percent) residents say they often or very often feel like they have someone they can turn to. About only half of low-amenity urban (49 percent) and suburban residents (52 percent) say the same.

Perhaps one of the most important differences between living in a high-amenity versus a low-amenity

area is the extent to which residents feel safe in their neighborhoods. Americans in high-amenity neighborhoods feel much safer than do those in low-amenity areas, regardless of community type. Sixty-nine percent of Americans who live in high-amenity urban neighborhoods say they would feel comfortable walking around at night, compared to 56 percent of those in moderate-amenity communities and less than half (44 percent) of those in low-amenity areas.

The Amenities Effect. Proximity to amenities, such as cafes, restaurants, parks, and libraries, is associated with a host of positive social outcomes. But it's worth considering whether amenity proximity is responsible for these social benefits or whether some other factor is involved. Where we live is associated with a number of possible confounding characteristics, such as race or ethnic background, educational attainment, age, political identity, and even religious affiliation. Americans who choose to live near libraries, coffee shops, and parks may be more predisposed to engage in community life because of who they are rather than their proximity to these places.

To account for these demographic and geographic variations, we ran three logistic regression models predicting neighborhood satisfaction, feelings of social support, and feelings of personal safety while controlling for various personal attributes and geographic characteristics. Across the three models, we included a standard set of demographic controls, such as age, marital status, race and ethnicity, income, education level, gender, and political affiliation. The models also included region of residency (based on the US Census definition) and self-reported community type—whether respondents lived in an urban, suburban, or small town and rural area.

Consistent with the findings above, amenity access strongly predicts positive feelings about one's community. Even controlling for a variety of demographic and geographic characteristics, proximity to neighborhood amenities, such as community centers and coffee shops, strongly predicts feelings of community satisfaction. Americans who live in neighborhoods with very high concentrations of amenities have a 39 percent probability of saying their communities are excellent.¹¹ Americans living in moderate-amenity communities have only a 28 percent probability of expressing this same sentiment, and those in neighborhoods with very low amenity access have only a 26 percent probability of reporting that their communities are excellent places to live.

Amenity access is also a robust predictor of neighborhood safety and security. Even after controlling for personal attributes, Americans who live in areas with greater amenity access are much more likely to say they feel safe. Americans living in communities that feature an array of neighborhood amenities nearby have an 80 percent probability of feeling safe walking around their neighborhoods alone at night. Americans who live in communities with moderate amenity access have a 72 percent chance of expressing comfort walking at night by themselves, while those with limited or no access to neighborhood amenities have only a 66 percent probability of being comfortable doing this.

Finally, amenity access is strongly associated with greater feelings of social support, even after accounting for important demographic factors. Americans who live in areas with high concentrations of neighborhood amenities, such as coffee shops, bars, and public parks, are far more likely to say that in the past four weeks they have often felt "there are people they can turn to." Neighborhoods with fewer amenities are less likely to claim this level of social support. Americans who live in very-high-amenity communities have a 75 percent probability of expressing that they often feel there is someone they can count on. In contrast, Americans residing in moderate-amenity communities have a 66 percent probability of saying they often feel there is someone they can turn to, while those living in very-low-amenity communities have only a 58 percent probability of expressing this feeling.

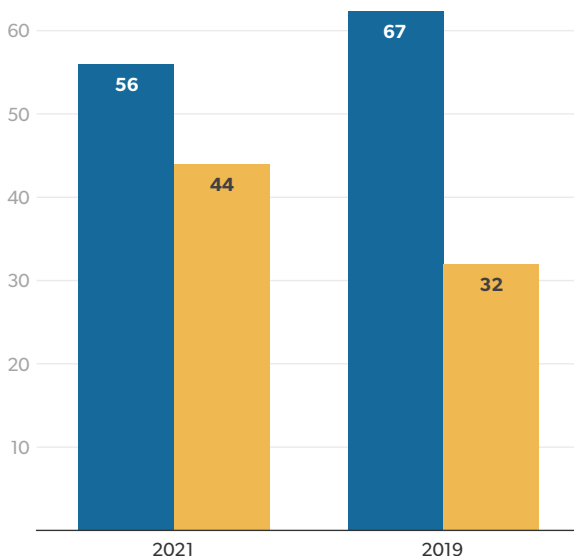
Third Places and Community Connection. Previous research has documented the importance of commercial spaces, such as bars, restaurants, and coffee shops, and public spaces, such as parks, libraries, and community centers, for providing opportunities to socialize and connect with people in the community. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg referred to these commercial and public spaces as third places, places where people could spend time when they were not at home, their "first place," or at work, their "second place."¹² However, because of COVID-19, many third places have been temporarily shuttered, are offering reduced hours, or have transformed into takeout-only establishments.

Despite more limited availability, most Americans (56 percent) still report having a spot in their local communities they go to regularly. Roughly four in 10 (44 percent) say they do not. Perhaps because the pandemic shuttered many commercial and public spaces, scrambled schedules, and even led many people to relocate, fewer Americans report having a favorite local place

Figure 16. Fewer Americans Have a Third Place

Percentage who say they have a coffee shop, bar, restaurant, park or other place in their community that they go to regularly

■ Yes, Have a Third Place ■ No, Do Not Have a Third Place



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).

Source: American Community and Civic Life Survey, October 2019; and American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

today than did just a couple years earlier. In 2019, about two-thirds (67 percent) of the public said they had a favorite local place they went to regularly (Figure 16).

Americans living in urban areas are actually more likely to have third places they regularly visit. More than six in 10 Americans living in a large city (62 percent) or a small city (61 percent) say they have a local haunt. In contrast, fewer people living in a small town (55 percent) or a rural area (44 percent) say they have places in their communities where they are regulars.

Not only do most Americans have a place in their neighborhoods or communities they regularly visit, but they are more likely than not to recognize other people there. Among Americans who have a regular community spot, the majority (63 percent) say they recognize other people from their communities there. Only 36 percent say they generally do not recognize others from their communities when they go to their local spots.

While urban residents are more likely to have third places, they are less likely to know the people there when they go. Fifty-six percent of big-city residents who have local spots say they recognize other people there,

compared to more than three-quarters of small-town (76 percent) and rural residents (78 percent).

Although third places come in many varieties—previous work has shown that in certain low-income communities McDonald’s restaurants served as important social hubs¹³—commercial locations are far more likely than government-funded public spaces to serve as community spots. Among those who regularly frequent third places, a majority describe the location as a coffee shop or cafe (29 percent) or a restaurant or bar (29 percent). One in 10 mention another type of commercial space, such as a barber or hair salon (2 percent), gym (3 percent), and bookstore or other type of shop (5 percent). Significantly, fewer Americans say their community spots are a public space. About one-quarter (24 percent) say the place they normally go is a public park or community garden, while very few mention community centers (2 percent), libraries (3 percent), or schools (1 percent).

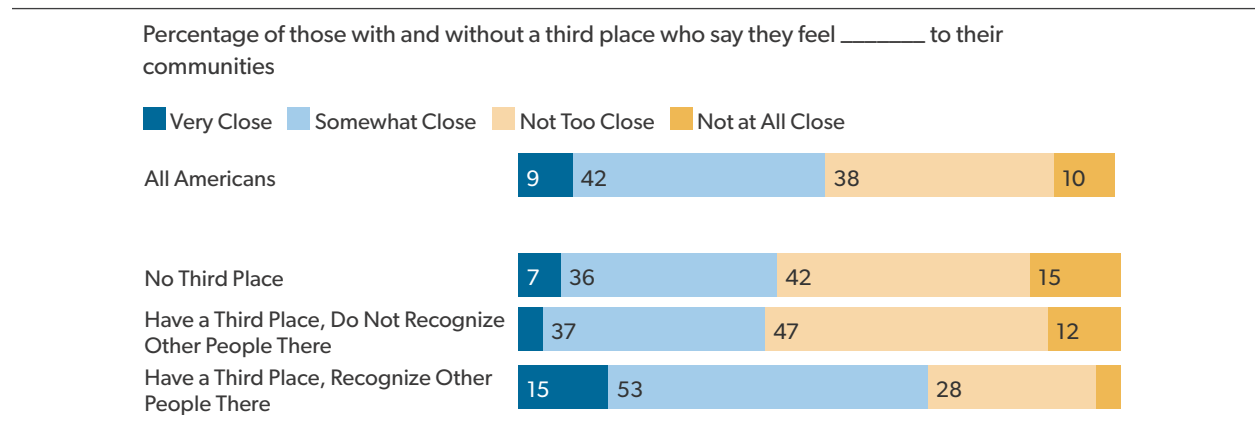
Coffee shops are particularly popular options for young women. Among young women who have regular local spots, 41 percent say it is a coffee shop or cafe, compared to only 22 percent of young men. Conversely, only 16 percent of young women say their local spots are a bar or restaurant, while 24 percent of young men say the same.

Americans with local spots tend to visit frequently. Over half (51 percent) report going to their neighborhood spots at least weekly, with 27 percent saying they go once a week and another 24 percent saying they go more than once a week.

Americans living in high-amenity areas are most likely to report having local spots. Three-quarters (75 percent) of Americans living in very-high-amenity areas say there are local places in their communities they go to regularly, compared to roughly half (56 percent) of those living in moderate-amenity and roughly one-quarter (23 percent) of those living in very-low-amenity areas.

The Cheers Effect. Americans with local spots report feeling more closely connected to their neighborhoods than those without one do. Fifty-eight percent of Americans with neighborhood spots say they feel either very or somewhat closely connected with those in their communities. In comparison, only 43 percent of those with no community spot say the same.

But the real benefit of third places seems to lie with being around people you know, referred to as the *Cheers effect*.¹⁴ Americans who recognize their neighbors at these local spots are even more likely to report feeling close to their neighborhoods. Over two-thirds (68

Figure 17. Americans Who Have a Local Spot Where They See People They Know Feel More Connected to Their Communities

Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 5,058).
Source: American Community Life Survey, July 2021.

percent) of Americans who recognize their neighbors report feeling closely connected to their communities and the people who live there. In contrast, only 41 percent of those who have a third place but do not generally know the people there say they feel connected to their community. These Americans are also more likely to trust their neighbors. More than eight in 10 (81 percent) Americans with third places who recognize others there say they trust their neighbors a great deal or fair amount, compared to 68 percent of those who have third places but do not recognize others there and 66 percent of those with no third place at all (Figure 17).

Americans who have a place in their communities where they spend time around people they know are also more likely to be personally connected to a community leader. A majority (54 percent) of Americans who spend time at a third place where they know people say they are connected to someone who is active in organizing neighborhood activities. Fewer than three in 10 Americans who do not have a third place (28 percent) or who do but do not generally know the people there (27 percent) know this type of person.

Having a local spot influences Americans' overall assessment of their communities. Thirty-nine percent of those who have local spots and recognize their neighbors there rate their communities as "excellent," compared to 23 percent of those who do not have local spots and 27 percent of those who have local spots but do not generally know the people there.

Americans who spend time in third places are also more likely to have a conversation with someone they do not know well. Nearly half (48 percent) of Americans

who have neighborhood spots where they generally recognize the people there say they regularly—at least once or twice a month—have a conversation with someone who they do not know well. In contrast, 28 percent of Americans who do not have a regular place in their communities, and 30 percent who do but do not generally recognize the people there, report regularly having a conversation with someone they do not know well.

Neighborhood Schools and School Diversity Preferences. What about other important local institutions, such as churches? Among those who belong to religious congregations, living close to their place of worship does not seem to offer any demonstrable social or civic benefit. The relationship is more complicated, and no clear pattern emerges.

Americans who live the closest and furthest away from their churches attend with about the same frequency. Roughly a third of Americans who live within walking distance (36 percent) and more than a moderate drive (36 percent) from their primary houses of worship say they attend religious services at least once a week. However, Americans who live a very short (45 percent), short (45 percent), or moderate trip by car (44 percent) attend services slightly more frequently.

What's more, living nearby your church or house of worship does not appear to increase the likelihood of spending time with fellow congregants. Nearly half of Americans living within walking distance (46 percent), a very short car trip (46 percent), a short car trip (46 percent), a moderate car trip (44 percent), and more than a moderate car trip (49 percent) from where they attend

religious services say they socialize with members of their places of worship at least once or twice a month.

Increasing Racial and Economic Diversity in Schools. Americans generally express support for increasing diversity in their local school districts. However, Americans express somewhat stronger support for increasing economic diversity compared to racial diversity. Sixty percent of Americans say they would favor redrawing school district boundaries to create more economically diverse school districts—although only 15 percent strongly support such an effort. Fifty-five percent of Americans say they would support adjusting school district boundaries to expand racial diversity in the district.

Redrawing school districts to increase racial and ethnic diversity is far more popular among Black and Hispanic Americans than it is among White Americans. More than three-quarters of Black (77 percent) Americans and a majority (58 percent) of Hispanic Americans support proposals to increase racial diversity in schools by adjusting district boundaries. White Americans are more conflicted over these types of proposals. Less than half (48 percent) of White Americans—and 46 percent of White parents of children under the age of 18—support redrawing school district boundaries to create more racially diverse districts. More than half of White parents (52 percent) oppose it.

There are massive generational differences among White Americans in their views on changing school districts to address racial diversity. Nearly two-thirds (67 percent) of young White adults support redrawing school district boundaries to create greater racial diversity, while only 41 percent of White seniors favor it.

Support for addressing economic diversity within districts is somewhat higher, particularly among Hispanics. More than half (53 percent) of White Americans and seven in 10 (70 percent) Hispanic Americans favor efforts to increase economic diversity in schools by adjusting district boundaries. Support among Black Americans is notably higher, with 79 percent expressing support for increasing economic diversity in schools.

Conclusion

As we approach the third year of the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19's effect on community life is

readily apparent. Dense urban communities, despite their access to a wide array of shops, entertainment, restaurants, and public spaces, are not as popular as they once were. And for some cities, many of these familiar spaces may have closed. When the pandemic finally recedes, the mass migration from high-density urban areas may reverse, but for now, Americans are more interested in living in places that afford them greater space.

Public and commercial spaces provide a host of social and personal benefits to Americans across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Access to neighborhood amenities increases feelings of solidarity with neighbors, trust, and connectedness.

Notably, when it comes to the places most likely to promote civic engagement, local communities often invest significant resources in developing and maintaining public spaces—parks, libraries, and community centers. But our research suggests that commercial spaces, such as cafes, bars, and restaurants, may serve as more effective community hubs.

Most Americans report having a local place in their communities they visit regularly. And although parks are popular places, few Americans report regular visits to the library or community center. Rather, coffee shops, bars, and restaurants appear to be much more attractive third places. And community spots matter. When Americans spend time in their community among people they know, they feel more connected to where they live and trusting of the people who live there with them. American community life is incredibly diverse. The types of problems Americans experience vary considerably depending on where they live. Urban residents worry much more about crime and homelessness, while Americans living in rural communities are apt to mention drug abuse as a major problem.

Even as the challenging circumstances of the past year shuttered storefronts, limiting access to public places and opportunities for social outings, most Americans say their community is a good or excellent place to live. And there is hope for the future. More Americans are optimistic rather than pessimistic about the future of their communities.

COVID-19 changed the way Americans interact with each other and their communities and what they value in a neighborhood. The more we understand these changing preferences, the better equipped we will be to foster connection and build trust with those around us.

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Appendix: Survey Methodology

The survey was designed and conducted by the American Enterprise Institute. Interviews were conducted among a random sample of 5,058 adults (age 18 and older), with oversamples of Church of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) and Jewish respondents living in the United States, including all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Interviews were conducted both online using a self-administered design and by telephone using live interviewers. All interviews were conducted among participants using a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the national US adult population run by NORC at the University of Chicago. Interviewing was conducted between June 11 and July 1, 2020.

Weighting was accomplished in two separate stages. First, panel base weights were calculated for every household based on the probability of selection from the NORC National Frame, the sampling frame used to sample housing units for AmeriSpeak. Household-level weights were then assigned to each eligible adult in every recruited household. In the second stage, sample demographics were balanced to match target

population parameters for gender, age, education, race and Hispanic ethnicity, division (US Census definitions), housing type, telephone usage, and religion.

The parameter for religious affiliation was derived from the 2020 American National Social Network Survey. The telephone usage parameter came from an analysis of the National Health Interview Survey. All other weighting parameters were derived from an analysis of the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The sample weighting was accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IPF) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables. Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the results.

The use of survey weights in statistical analyses ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target population. The margin of error for the survey is ± 1.86 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. The design effect for the survey is 1.82.

Notes

1. Because the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted typical patterns of church attendance and community involvement, the question contained the following phrasing: "In a normal year, that is not including the past 12 months, how often did you do the following."
2. Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.
3. Kim Parker et al., *What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities*, Pew Research Center, May 22, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/urban-suburban-and-rural-residents-views-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.
4. The survey included fewer than 100 ($N = 79$) respondents who identified as conservatives living in a liberal neighborhood. Results should be interpreted with caution.
5. The survey included fewer than 100 ($N = 79$) respondents who identified as conservatives living in a liberal neighborhood. Results should be interpreted with caution.
6. Pew Research Center, *The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.
7. Felix Salmon, "Media Trust Hits New Low," *Axios*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/media-trust-crisis-2bf0ec1c-00c0-4901-9069-e26b21c283a9.html>.
8. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999).
9. Daniel A. Cox and Ryan Streeter, "The Importance of Place: Neighborhood Amenities as a Source of Social Connection and Trust," *American Enterprise Institute*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-importance-of-place-neighborhood-amenities-as-a-source-of-social-connection-and-trust/>.
10. Cox and Streeter, "The Importance of Place."
11. The predicted probability was computed from the logistic regression model for amenity type by holding all other covariates at their means.
12. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*.
13. Stuart M. Butler and Carmen Diaz, "'Third Places' as Community Builders," *Brookings Institution*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2016/09/14/third-places-as-community-builders/>.
14. The *Cheers* effect is the effect of having a place where you recognize others and they recognize you, in reference to the sitcom *Cheers*.



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