



Dan River Region Social Capital Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF 2011 RESULTS

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Executive Summary

The 2011 Dan River Region Social Capital Survey was conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at the University of Virginia, at the request of the Danville Regional Foundation. This telephone survey of 1,140 randomly selected individuals living in the City of Danville, Pittsylvania County and Caswell County, NC was conducted in the spring of 2011.

Overall, the purposes of this survey were:

- To measure how people feel about the region and their future in it
- To measure people's attachment to their community
- To measure the region's social capital which includes civic engagement, political involvement, and connectedness to the community and serves as an indication of community strength and vitality
- To compare current results with baseline results gathered in 2009.

Previous research has shown that a community with abundant social capital is better able to meet the economic needs of residents, defend the area's political interests, fend off external threats, and protect the quality of life of its residents. Specialists in community development have long recognized that if social capital can be strengthened in a community, then the capacity of that community to provide for its residents is enhanced. For all these reasons, it is important to the long-range plans of the Danville Regional Foundation, and the communities it serves, to better understand the state of social capital in the Dan River Region.

The 2009 survey established baseline numbers for measuring social capital in the Danville area. These results will be used in this report for comparisons between the two surveys.

Survey Results

Overall Quality of Life

Residents of the Dan River Region were asked to rate the overall quality of life in their community. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 represents the worst possible community in which to live, and 10 represents the best possible community, residents of the Dan River Region gave a mean rating of 7.31. This rating suggests that residents have a high regard for the quality of life in the region. This rating is not statistically significant from the 2009 rating. More than half (50.8%) of respondents gave an "8" or better for their rating of Danville as a place to live.

Residents of Caswell County and Pittsylvania County rated the quality of life in their communities on average higher than those who live in Danville City (mean of 7.59 and 7.64 compared to 6.79). However, the gap between ratings in Danville and in the two counties narrowed between 2009 and 2011.

Community Attachment

Overall, the residents of the Dan River Region have a strong sense of community. They feel a sense of belonging and feel it is important for them to live in this particular area. Most residents have neighbors or relatives in their neighborhood or close by to support them. They also feel they have an impact in making their community a better place to live. Overall, the results of the 2011 survey show little change on most of the social indicators from the 2009 results.

Research suggests that how well a resident is attached to their community has a significant impact on their perceptions of the quality of life within the community. We created a community attachment index to measure how attached residents of the Dan River Region are to their community and to assess the impact that their community attachment has on the ratings of quality of life given by residents in the Dan River Region.

Eight variables in the survey were combined to form the community attachment index. For each of these eight questions where respondents answered “very important” or “strongly agree,” one point was scored on the index for a total of up to eight points. Higher levels of community attachment were positively related to residents’ perception of quality of life within the Dan River Region.

The community attachment index declined significantly from a mean of 4.16 in 2009 to a mean of 3.79 in 2011. Note that the index counts only the top categories on each of the opinion questions. The index declined primarily because there were significant drops in the number who strongly agree that it is important to live in the area and important to feel a part of the community. When it comes to mean ratings on even these two indicators, however, the drops were considerably more modest.

Civic Participation

Residents of the Dan River Region are highly church-oriented. More than 50 percent (53.7%) of respondents said they attend religious services every week or almost every week, and only one out of ten indicated they seldom or never attend religious services.

Membership in community organizations was one measure of civic participation in this study. By far the most common type of organizational membership was religious organizations (65.7%). Other organization types in which people most frequently have membership are; health clubs, sports clubs, etc. (27.1%); hobby, garden, or recreation groups (24.0%); school support groups (23.4%); organizations for older people (29.7%); and professional and trade associations (22.4%). A total of 168 respondents (15.9%) indicated they do not belong to any of the groups. The only groups with a statistically significant membership change since the 2009 survey are the organizations for older people and civic or community organizations, both of which experienced a decline.

More than fifty percent (54.0%) of respondents said they have volunteered time to charities, schools, hospitals, religious organizations, neighborhood associations, and civic or other groups. Of those respondents who do volunteer, more than one-fourth (26.1%) of respondents to the 2011 survey said they volunteer 2 hours or less per month. Slightly less than that said they volunteer 3-5 hours per month (24.2%) or 6-10 hours per month (24.8%). One out of ten said they volunteer 11-20 hours per month (12.5%) or more than 20 hours per month (11.9%). However, about half of the overall sample has not recently volunteered at all.

Political Participation

Nearly nine in ten registered voters claimed that they voted in the 2010 election. Compared to 2009 respondents, who were asked if they voted in the 2008 presidential elections, these numbers show a statistically significant decline. This may be the result of less interest in a mid-year election cycle. Overall, the residents of the Dan River Region are not as likely to participate in other types of political activities.

People in the Economy

Changes in employment throughout the Dan River Region were not statistically significant but it appears that fewer responders were working full time and more were working in part time positions, compared to those in the 2009 survey. One in five of the respondents said they work more than one paid job.

When respondents were asked about their perceptions of their work, the picture that emerges is of a somewhat underemployed labor force. Those who do have jobs, however, are highly engaged with their work and most find their jobs to be personally rewarding.

The economic situation of the country continues to have an impact on the Dan River Region. Significantly higher numbers of people in 2011 said they have been negatively impacted by the downturn in the economy than was expressed in 2009. More than half of the respondents said the higher cost of living was the main reason. One in five said they have had a loss or reduction in income.

Children and Schools

More than two-thirds (70.1%) of respondents said that the Dan River Region is a good place to raise children. Another two-thirds of respondents (67.6%) said when a child is ready to leave home, it is better for them to move to some other area. A new-for-2011 follow-up question asked whether respondents hoped that young people who moved away for other opportunities would return to the Danville area. Those responding “hope person returns” slightly outnumbered those responding “better to stay away.” (See Chapter 7.) Open-ended responses regarding the reasons for choosing “better to stay away” often involved concerns about a lack of job opportunities in the area. (See Appendix F.)

In the opinion of our respondents, the biggest challenge affecting children and youth in the Dan River Region is the lack of jobs. Respondents showed strong support for quality education and youth education programs to provide a better quality of life for their children and youth.

A new-for-2011 survey question about how well the community is helping prepare children for preschool elicited mixed responses. (See Chapter 7.) No significant change is evident, as yet, as a result of the work the community is doing in the area of early education to prepare children for school. It may take a couple of years for this to have a significant impact.

Conclusion

Any assessment of social capital in the Dan River Region must recognize that some forms of civic engagement are closely correlated with socio-economic status. In a region suffering from economic setbacks, lack of education and income among residents will have an effect on how involved they are in civic life. Newcomers to the community do not start out with strong community attachments; those ties take time to develop. Since this year’s survey included a larger number of relative newcomers, our index of community attachment declined somewhat. Taking these factors into account, overall the level of social capital continues to be fairly strong in terms of community attachment, social connectedness and religious involvement, but in need of development in areas of civic engagement. There are some encouraging signs of change in the way residents perceive their quality of life, and in the growth of some key civic skills. This survey thus points to areas, subgroups and arenas of activity where the Dan River Region may be able to improve the level of civic engagement, the strength of social capital and hence the quality of life for its residents.

For the 2011 survey, points of particular interest include the following:

- Optimism about the region's future is increasing even as nostalgia about the region's past recedes. (See Chapter 2.)
- One specific indicator of community attachment – "it's important for me to feel a part of the community in which I live" – went down significantly. This is in part attributable to the decreasing length of residence in Danville of the average survey respondent. (See Chapter 3.)
- Since 2009, there have been some positive changes in general perceptions of crime and personal safety (see Chapter 3) as well as in perceptions of the challenges to youth posed by gangs and drugs in schools (see Chapter 7).
- Various new as well as repeated questions on health issues (Chapter 8) suggest somewhat less concern with health issues than might be expected.