

Opinion: Californians want more from neighborhoods

By Joe Mathews

California is a state of large things: A 1,100-mile coastline, giant mountain ranges, and big cities. In such a sprawling place, how much could people care about their own little neighborhoods?

Answer: An awful lot.



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This is a state of neighborhoods. And Californians are very devoted to their own. We identify ourselves as residents of neighborhoods more frequently than as residents of towns and cities. While surveys show we are mostly satisfied with our communities and our lives, we also want more from our neighborhoods.

Much more.

Californians' hunger for neighborhoods that offer more opportunity is demonstrated in an extensive "Advancing Wellness" poll of Californians from the California Wellness Foundation and the Field Research Corporation. That love, and that hunger, bind the 30-some stories, including this column, that comprise a Zócalo series on California and the health of its neighborhoods.

If you consume national media, you might think America is an especially anxious and pessimistic country. But in the Advancing Wellness poll, about 90 percent of Californians are at least somewhat satisfied with how things are going in their lives; 91 percent of us are at least somewhat hopeful about the future.

Such hope and optimism begins at home. Majorities of us see our own communities as healthy places to live, where people of diverse backgrounds get along and where we can find the parks, schools, public safety, groceries, and race relations we want.

But the picture is far from golden, particularly if you're light on gold.

It is not news that California, by some measures, is our most unequal state. We lead the country in billionaires and are home to America's richest region (the Bay Area), but we also have the nation's highest poverty rate (when we measure the value of public assistance and the cost of living).

These differences are most intimately felt at the neighborhood level. Californians worry that the problems of their neighborhoods will determine their own fates. If your neighborhood is polluted and you don't know your neighbors, will you have health problems and be disconnected from the institutions—in education, in health, in the economy—that might change your circumstances?

There are big income-related differences in how Californians see neighborhoods, the poll suggests. Seventy-three percent of upper-income Californians describe their community as at least very good on being a safe place to live; among low-income Californians, that figure is only 40 percent.

The poll shows that people's ambitions for their neighborhoods are high across the spectrum. One big ambition: Californians desperately want their neighborhoods to help them find jobs.

That's not conventional wisdom. Public conversation about jobs tends to link employment to the national, international, or larger regional economy, and to trends outside the control of your neighborhood, from technology to education to trade. But millions of Californians have become unhappily accustomed to long commutes—from the places where we live to the places where we work. "Can your neighborhood get you a job?" is a fresh question.

It's a question Californians want answered. Fewer than half of those in the survey—44 percent—rated their own community as a good or excellent place to get a good job; 52 percent offered a negative rating. And just 28 percent of Californians said their community was good at offering job opportunities for those who most need them, like at-risk youth or the Californians returning to the labor force after doing prison time.

A neighborhood weak on jobs has a snowball effect. Among the top threats to community health identified by Californians in the poll were extended unemployment by residents, employment in high-stress jobs, or people having to work multiple jobs.

While conversation about community health often centers on quality-of-life questions, Californians see community health as fundamentally economic. And they're right. And if our state can find answers to their concerns, we'd also be building a more cohesive California with higher incomes, better and more affordable housing, more accessible education, and smarter treatment of chronic health problems.

Of course, Californians don't all want exactly the same things from their neighborhoods. Other surveys and rankings of the most popular Californian places to live are striking for the variety of cultures, economies, geographies, and climates people prefer, in neighborhoods from Folsom to Poway.

But the Advancing Wellness data show a strong correlation

between how people feel about their own health and the level of opportunities they see in their very own neighborhoods. We want a rich mix of offerings—from schools to parks and especially to jobs—and we want them close by.

These days, the biggest California dreams begin at home.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.