

"Federation Corner" column
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It takes a village to raise a village

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Most discussions of shaping and improving the behavior of youth focus on individuals and the sources of direct influence such as family, schools, and organized social/recreational programs. Little attention has been given to the broader and collective influence that neighborhoods can have on their residents.

However, research by internationally recognized evolutionary biologist, David Sloan Wilson is changing this situation. It indicates that neighborhoods can be a significant influence on youth behavior. He surveyed 6th through 12th grade public school children in his home town of Binghamton, NY on their prosocial beliefs and behaviors (altruistic characteristics and empathy towards others).

Their relative levels of prosociality scores by residence were then mapped across the entire city, which revealed a clustering where children in some neighborhoods reflected a high degree of prosociality, while other areas were much lower. To determine whether these espoused values and attitudes were expressed in actual behaviors, Wilson and his graduate students conducted a series of experiments and observations throughout the city.

The first involved dropping unmailed, addressed letters on streets around the city to see whether passersby would pick them up and put them in a mailbox. Interestingly, the "lost letters" were mailed at a significantly higher rate in the high scoring prosocial neighborhoods. Another innovative research method was to methodically assess the extent to which residents would decorate their homes for various holidays. Wilson and his students divided the city into a grid and systemically surveyed the residences by driving down each street and recording the degree to which the houses were decorated. Finally, data such as crime statistics, school delinquency, and evaluation of neighborhood quality by having nonresidents rate photos of these areas were used to assess any correlations with the students' responses to the prosociality survey. Each of these indicators resulted in evidence of a strong relationship between neighborhood conditions and level of prosociality among children.

Finally Wilson was able to resurvey the city's school children three years after the first survey. With this later data set, he was able to track any changes in prosocial attitudes among children who had moved since the first survey was done. Amazingly he found that prosociality could decline when children went from a neighborhood with a high prosocial score to a community with a low score. The reverse was also true.

In his analysis, Wilson controlled for factors such as income levels. While income can contribute to the quality and extensiveness of social support structures available to children, it did not have a direct relationship to prosociality in that some poor neighborhoods can still provide sufficient supports to children.

Consequently, he concludes that, "Prosociality and the relationships it creates are essential to society, and our study suggests that a prosocial society perpetuates itself by providing an environment that encourages such behavior in youth. Prosociality is not exclusively a function of the individual, or even of parenting practices, as it is also impacted by the broader community".

Wilson's article is available at:
<http://evolution.binghamton.edu/dswilson/wpcontent/uploads/2010/01/bnp1.pdf>

So, small acts of kindness and volunteering to help with community events and activities can lead to not only a better neighborhood but also better residents, as these behaviors can replicate so that we all benefit. Civic organizations offer many opportunities for you to participate and contribute to the neighborhood quality of life and sense of community. So please respond when requests are made for your help. It will be a better neighborhood when you do.

REMINDER: as the Montgomery County Civic Federation does every year, following its June meeting (which took place this year on Monday, June 9) the group takes a break in its meeting schedule, resuming monthly meetings in September. But the work of the MCCF does not cease, and we continue to work with our government officials to effect policy changes that will improve quality of life in the county. If you or your community has a question, or needs assistance on an issue over the summer, visit our website at montgomerycivic.org, where you can get information on how to contact Civic Federation officers and committee chairs who can help.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com