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# Community Vitality

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**i** CANADIAN  
**index**  
OF WELLBEING  
Measuring what matters

## Introduction

The development of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) is being undertaken by a number of researchers and organizations across Canada, under the direction of the Atkinson Charitable Foundation. The goal of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for the community vitality domain and identify an initial set of headline indicators for its measurement.

While many domains that make up the CIW are well established, with clearly articulated and accepted indicators, the domain of community vitality is relatively undeveloped in Canada. Nor is there a uniform or broadly accepted definition of what community vitality means. Despite this level of imprecision, individuals – including participants in the Stakeholder and Public Consultations around the CIW – report that community vitality broadly understood is central to their understanding of wellbeing. One key informant said: “this is the domain where the rubber hits the road.” And individual’s relationship to their community – both in terms of the stock and flow of resources and opportunities available to people and in terms of the strength and quality of relationships that people enjoy – is inextricably linked to wellbeing. The question is: what are the most important components of community vitality of the many possible dimensions to capture in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing?

## Community Vitality Domain – Proposed Conceptual Model

This paper explores this question by exploring the concept of community vitality – how it has been defined in theory and in practice – and related concepts such as social capital and inclusion. Based on this review, the paper presents the following definition of community vitality as a starting point:

*Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive relationships between residents, private sector, public sector and civil society organizations that work to foster individual and collective wellbeing. Vital communities are those that are able to cultivate and marshal these relationships in order to create, adapt and thrive in the changing world and thus improve wellbeing of citizens.*

This definition emphasizes the understanding of vitality as **the capacity to thrive and change** in the pursuit of individual and social wellbeing, in ways that are inclusive and respectful of the needs and aspirations of diverse communities. Taking this definition as a basis, our Conceptual Model for Community Vitality is comprised of four sub-components, organized into two main groups. The first group of indicators are measures of **Social Relationships**. The three sub-components are: Social Engagement, Social Support and Community Safety. The second group of indicators are measures of **Social Norms and Values**. Under this heading, we include the sub-component: Attitudes towards Others and Community. The model is summarized in the following chart.

## Community Vitality Domain

### Social Relationships

#### Social Engagement

- Social Participation
- Civic Participation
- Economic Participation

#### Social Support

- Size of Social Networks
- Reciprocity

#### Community Safety

- Crime
- Perception of Safety

### Social Norms and Values

#### Attitudes towards Others and Community

- Trust
- Respect for Diversity
- Altruism
- Sense of Belonging

## Proposed Headline Indicators

The paper identifies a suite of 23 indicators to measure the community vitality domain. A shorter list of 11 headline indicators has been chosen for inclusion in the composite index, encompassing each of the dimensions of the proposed conceptual model. These indicators have been identified in research as relevant to the understanding of the character and dynamics of social relationships and networks. The selection of the indicators has been guided by the need to identify at least two points in time, a mix of subjective and objective indicators, and the desirability of deriving cross-national comparative estimates in the future. The proposed headline indicators are:

- Participation in group activities
- Volunteering
- Number of close relatives
- Providing assistance to others
- Property crime
- Violent crime
- Walking alone after dark
- Trust
- Experience of discrimination
- Caring for others
- Belonging to community

## Main Messages

As described further on in this report, each sub-component is measured with headline indicators and several secondary indicators. National and provincial/territorial level trends are reviewed for each indicator. A number of main messages emerge from this analysis:

1. Two-thirds of Canadians in 2008 were members of voluntary groups or organizations, an increase in participation since the late 1990s
2. Four in ten Canadians volunteer with non-profit and charitable organizations, a proportion that fell in the late 1990s, but has been rising since 2000
3. The size of Canadian's social networks is growing; Canadians report a significant increase in the number of close relatives and close friends.
4. A growing number of Canadians report that they provide help to others directly on their own; over three-quarters of Canadians across the country report extending assistance to family, friends and neighbours.
5. Property crime rates have been on a downward trend across the country since the early 1990s
6. Similarly, the violent crime rate has been trending down. In 2009, the number of violent offences declined again, with the exception of increases in the rate of firearm offences and attempted murder
7. Canadians report high levels of personal safety; the proportion feeling safe walking after dark has increased between 1993 and 2009
8. Less than half of Canadians believe that, generally speaking, people can be trusted, a decline from levels reported in 2005
9. In 2009, 9.3% of Canadians reported experiencing discrimination because of their ethnicity, race, culture, skin colour, religion or language, a two-fold increase from 4.1% reported in 2004
10. Four in ten Canadians reported being concerned about the needs of others, regardless of the pressures of their own lives. This represents an increase from the mid 1990s when only one in four did.
11. The majority of Canadians express strong attachment to their local community and have done for several years

On balance, the positive trend of most of these indicators is heartening, suggesting that the wellbeing of Canadians as measured by the quality of their relationships is improving over time. That said, these findings reveal that more research is needed to unpack these aggregate figures, to examine the strength and density of social relationships and societal norms and values at lower levels of geography and for different groups in the population. The increase in the proportion of Canadians reporting discrimination is a troubling sign. Are all citizens enjoying the same access to prosperity and wellbeing? This is one of Canada's most fundamental challenges moving forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Next Steps**

Much remains to be done to flesh out community vitality measurement – in general and for the purposes of the CIW. First, further analysis of our initial suite of indicators is needed, to explore the difference in social relationships and related norms and values for different sub-populations and geographies. Further work should also be undertaken to test and verify the value to this initial set of indicators and the conceptual model in describing and tracking community vitality over time. Second, these indicators have been selected based largely on the availability of trend data. There are certainly other possible indicators of community vitality worthy of exploration. This field of inquiry is relatively young. Much could be profitably gained from employing different methodologies to identify and analyse the structure and dynamics of various types relationships and networks that operate in communities.

Lastly, the goal of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing project is to enable Canadians to share in the best possible health and wellbeing by identifying, developing and publicizing measures that offer clear, valid and regular reporting on progress toward achieving the health and wellbeing we seek as a nation. To this end, it will be important to explore the links between the different domains of the CIW so that we are better equipped to identify and explain notable trends and gaps. More specifically, such an examination in partnership with other organizations working at the local, provincial and national levels, will assist in understanding the impact of positive or negative levels of community vitality – for individuals and communities. This is key to developing an action to enhance the wellbeing of all Canadians.

Based in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing Network is an independent, non-partisan group of national and international leaders, researchers, organizations, and grassroots Canadians. Its mission is to report on quality of life at the national level and promote a dialogue on how to improve it through evidence-based policies that are responsive to the needs and values of Canadians.

The Network's signature product is the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW). The CIW measures Canada's quality of life and tracks progress in eight interconnected categories. It allows us, as Canadians, to see if we are better off or worse off than we used to be – and why. It helps identify what we need to change to achieve a better outcome and to leave the world a better place for the generations that follow.

The Honourable Roy J. Romanow, Chair  
The Honourable Monique Bégin, Deputy Chair



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