

The Impact of Traffic on Social Capital

In 1970, Donald Appleyard conducted a ground breaking study of traffic problems in San Francisco neighbourhoods. His theory was that an increase in the amount of traffic through and area affects a community in much the same way as an increase in crime does. Appleyard chose three residential streets which shared a similar economic and ethnic diversity. The only difference between these three neighbourhoods was the level of traffic that travelled down each street. The three streets involved in the survey were: Octavia Street (a *light* street according to Appleyard's definition), Gough Street (a *medium* street) and Franklin Street (a *heavy* street). The *heavy* street experienced approximately 16,000 cars a day, the *medium* street was used by 8,000 cars daily and the *light* street had roughly 2,000 vehicles per day.

During his survey, Appleyard asked the residents on each of the streets to indicate on a neighbourhood map, the location of their friends and acquaintances. He also asked each household to indicate on the same map, what they perceived to be the propriety they felt responsible for maintaining. In other words, residents were asked if they felt responsible for sweeping the sidewalk in front of their house, or did they consider that to be the responsibility of someone else.

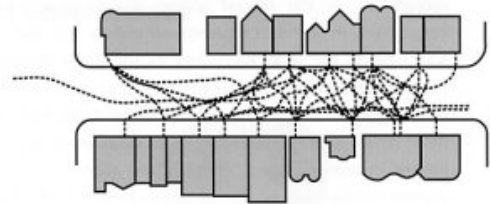
Some of the results of this survey were expected by Appleyard. For instance, an increase in traffic was usually accompanied by an increase in noise, danger, litter and pollution. But the survey research also provided some rather surprising conclusions. First, as mentioned earlier, increased traffic resulted in more litter, but

the garbage was not brought by the cars but it accumulated because local residents no longer felt responsible for picking up the garbage in front of their houses. Cars, and not the local residents, were now perceived to own the road. Secondly, residents who lived in the *medium* and *heavy* traffic streets expressed a greater feeling of social isolationism. The maps that they drew indicated fewer friends in the area than those maps drawn by residents of Octavia Street (a *light* street). In fact, conditions on Octavia Street were quite pleasant. Residents tended to pick up the garbage in front of their houses, swept the sidewalks, and allowed their children to play on the streets. The data also indicated that they had three times as many friends as those people who lived on Franklin (a *heavy* street). Residents on Gough Street (a *medium* street) expressed that they felt their street was changing; they no longer felt as safe as they used to and they wished that the noise level would decrease.

Therefore as you can see, an increase in traffic not only causes commuter stress, but it also has a negative impact on a neighbourhood. With an increase in noise, residents no longer congregate on the sidewalk and talk with fellow neighbours. People instead decide to spend a greater amount of time isolated in their houses. Don't you think it's time to reclaim or communities for the people who live in them, rather than the cars that drive through them?

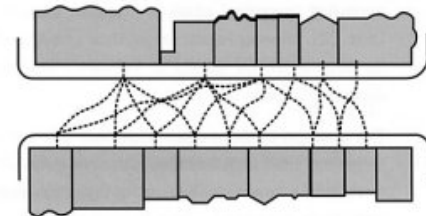
Light Traffic

3.0 friends per person
6.3 acquaintances



Moderate Traffic

1.3 friends per person
4.1 acquaintances



Heavy Traffic

0.9 friends per person
3.1 acquaintances

