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SoCal Residents Not as Trusting as Rest of Nation

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complements data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. This Fact Sheet presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix. The information from the survey can help better inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities, and can also help the residents of this region gain insight into who they are as a community. Here we look at levels of trust in Southern California. Overall, Southern California residents are not as trusting as Americans in general. On an individual level, trust is related to one's opinions and behavior. And finally, higher levels of income and education increase levels of trust, as does being white and being older.

BACKGROUND

Trust can mean many different things, but one important definition is a belief held by an individual that he or she can rely on the future reciprocal actions of others. In more common terms, it is faith that others will follow through on an explicit or implicit agreement, or adhere to prevailing social and group norms and values. Trust is important because it facilitates collective action, group cooperation, and inter-personal exchange without requiring immediate payoff. Trust enables individuals to have confidence in information they receive from their network of family members, friends, acquaintances, and professional associates. Trust exists in many societal domains, but it is particularly critical in civil society, which lacks the legal means of the public sector or competitive mechanisms of economic markets to enforce agreements. Trust is a fundamental characteristic associated with community cohesion.

Trust, however, is not a given. In recent years, there has been growing concern about a decline in people's trust in others and the role that this plays in the waning of

civic engagement and community ties. (See for example, Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of the American Community*, 2000). Another important concern is a low level of trust within some ethnic groups and economic classes. Trust, particularly for people in general, appears to be correlated with life chances and opportunities. The Southern California Public Opinion Survey examines the prevalence of trust, its relationship to other items in the survey, and its variation across groups

OVERVIEW OF TRUST

The available data from the 2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey and other surveys indicate substantial variation over time and across communities in the proportion of trust in others. The most widely used survey question related to trust is, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" This question, or ones with slight variations in wording, is designed to capture the most generalized aspect of trust in others. Statistics from the General Social Survey show a secular decline in the relative number of persons who responded positively to this question (i.e., they generally trust others). Since the mid-1990s, the percentage has hovered in the mid-30s.

Results from the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey show enormous variations across communities in the relative number of those trusting others (see Figure 1). Overall, smaller communities tend to have proportionately more trusting respondents than larger metropolitan areas. Moreover, disadvantaged neighborhoods within a given geographic area report rates at or below the one-third mark. Among the communities (that is, excluding neighborhoods), Los

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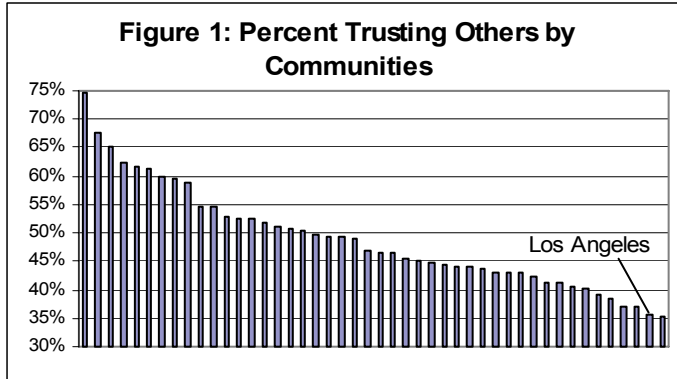
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul Ong is a professor in urban planning, social welfare, and Asian American studies at UCLA and Director of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

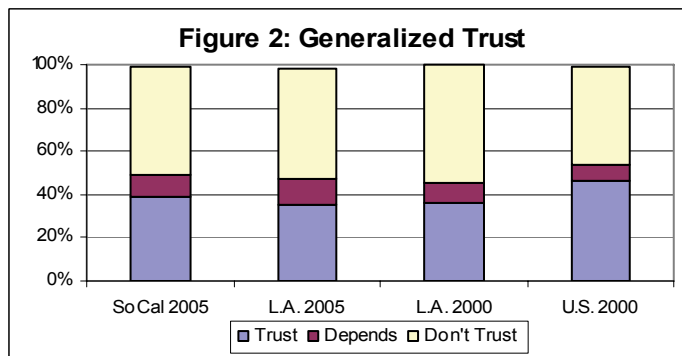
Kim Haselhoff is a post-doctoral fellow at the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

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Angeles County is second from the bottom, with only 36 percent. It is worth noting that Los Angeles County is the largest community included in the survey, and its low rate is likely to be influenced by its large population size, as well as its ethnic diversity and sizeable immigrant population.



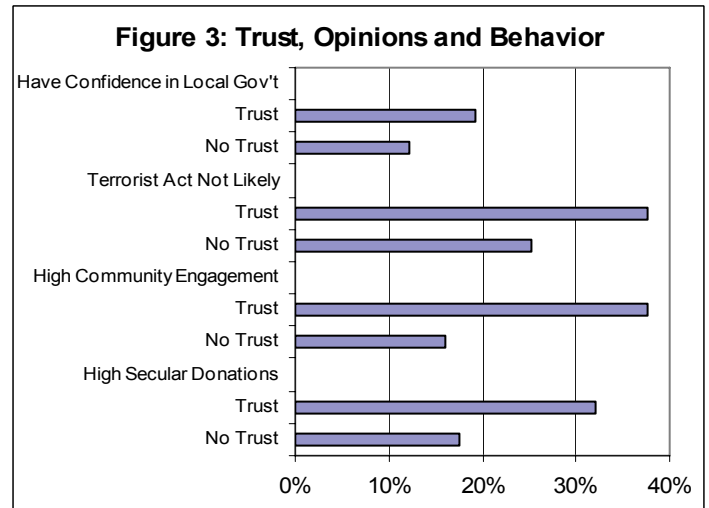
The percentages from the 2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey are comparable to those from the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey. In 2005, 39 percent of the respondents stated that they generally trust others, while 49 percent said that they did not. Another 11 percent stated that trust depended on the situation, and 1 percent did not give a response. Residents in Los Angeles County are slightly less trusting, but the difference is only marginally statistically significant. Figure 2 compares the results from the 2005 and 2000 surveys for the county, along with the overall results for Southern California in 2005 and for the nation in 2000. The two sets of statistics are remarkably similar.



TRUST, RELATED OPINIONS AND BEHAVIOR

As suggested in the Background section, generalized trust is related to other opinions and behavior. This includes opinions about the efficacy of government and the likelihood of a terrorist act. The former has been a bread-and-butter item in public opinion surveys, while the latter has emerged as a recent concern following the September 11, 2001 terrorist acts. The association with

assessments of the public sector can be seen in the percentages that have confidence in local government (see Figure 3). Southern Californians who trust others are one and a half times as likely to have confidence in local government than those who are not trusting. The former group also tends to believe we live in a safer world. Again, they are one and a half times more likely to believe that there will not be an act of terrorism in Southern California within the next two years.



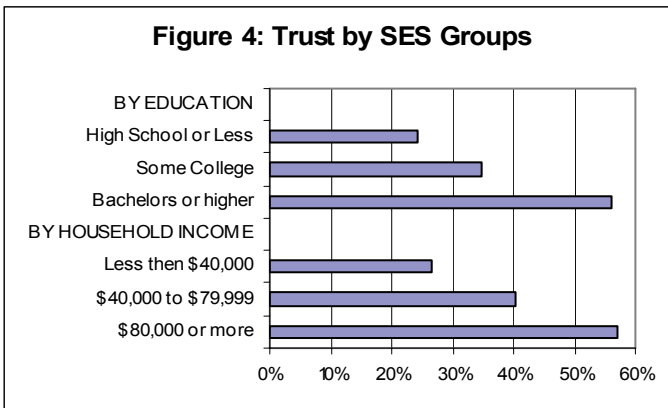
The correlation between trust and behavior in civil society can be seen in the bottom half of Figure 3. Community engagement is measured by a composite score from questions on contacting elected officials, participating in neighborhood meetings or events, and volunteering for a non-religious organization. Using this measure, Southern Californians who trust others are over twice as likely to engage in community activities than those who do not trust. The former group is also more likely to make a monetary donation to non-religious charities, organizations, or causes. The bars in the figure represent that proportion donating at least \$500 during the past twelve months. Those with trust are nearly twice as likely to fall into this category.

Although the above associations are significant, it is important to note that the results do not mean causality. It is likely that many of the same underlying factors that increase the likelihood of trusting also affects opinions about government, safety, volunteerism, and giving.

GROUP DIFFERENCES IN TRUST

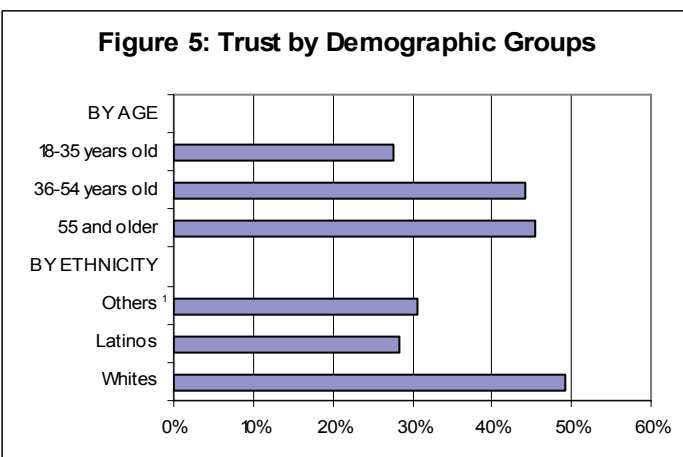
Finally, it is useful to examine variations in trust by socioeconomic and demographic groups. Education is a form of human capital and is related to both earnings and social status. We find that those with a bachelor's degree are over twice as likely to trust others than those with a high school education or less (see Figure 4). A more direct measure of economic status is household

income, and using this variable produces disparities similar to those for educational attainment. Those in high-income households are over twice as likely to trust others than those in low-income households.



There are also variations in generalized trust by demographic characteristics, although the differences are not as large. Younger respondents are less likely to trust than others. The difference is over one and a half times (see Figure 5). Moreover, relatively fewer minorities fall into the trust category. The difference between whites and Latinos is between one and a half to two times.

The above variations by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics are significant, and the patterns are consistent with the interpretation that trust is embedded in the structure of opportunity. Those who have benefited from societal institutions and the economy have the means to participate in a larger range of organizations and networks. Moreover, the public sector and civic institutions are more responsive to their needs. Both phenomena encourage trust in what is effectively a supportive and rewarding structure. On the other hand, the opposite holds for those who have to struggle to make ends meet and are on the margins of society and the economy. Increasing generalized trust is a worthwhile public policy goal, but this may require paying attention to some more fundamental problems facing this region.



APPENDIX

The **2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey** is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from campus and community organizations. UCLA units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute for Transportation Studies, the Center for Civil Society, and the Anderson School of Management. Three public agencies participated in the process: the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC). Several UCLA faculty provided valuable input: Professors Vickie Mays, Michael Stoll, Brian Taylor, Amy Zegart, Frank Gilliam, Helmut Anheier, Chris Thornberg, and Ed Leamer.

The 2005 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered seven topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) transportation, 4) the state of the regional economy, 5) housing, 6) civic engagement, and 7) major disasters. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys. Half of respondents were asked questions related to trust.

The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January and February 2005 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1544 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income, and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample, and +/- 3.7 percent for the subsample answering the questions related to trust. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

The **General Social Survey** is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, which has asked the generalized trust question 25 times since 1972. Tabulations in this Fact Sheet are made through the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program (CSM) at the University of California, Berkeley.

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The **2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey** was conducted by the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University with Professor Robert D. Putnam as the principal investigator. The tabulations in this Fact Sheet are made from the data set archived as study US-MISC2000-SOCCAP by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

¹ "Other" includes Asians, African-Americans, mixed ethnicities, as well as respondents who did not indicate their ethnicity on the survey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DISCLAIMER

Neither the University of California, the School of Public Affairs nor the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

The **Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies** was established to promote the study, understanding and solution of regional policy issues, with special reference to Southern California, including problems of the environment, urban design, housing, community and neighborhood dynamics, transportation and economic development. It is a focus of interdisciplinary activities, involving numerous faculty members and graduate students from many schools and departments at UCLA. It also fosters links with researchers at other California universities and research institutes on issues of relevance to regional policy. Founded in 1988 with a \$5 million endowment from Ralph and Goldy Lewis, it was directed until December 1994 by Professor Allen J. Scott, directed by Roger Waldinger from 1994 through 1998 and is currently directed by Paul Ong. The Center is supported by its endowment, other private donors and foundations and research grants from a variety of agencies. The director works with an executive committee, with guidance from an advisory board that includes members drawn from both the University and the wider community.

REFERENCES

California Community Foundation. (2001). *Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey: Data Highlights from the Los Angeles Sample*.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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