

Why Our Neck of the Woods Is Better Than the Forest

By Tom W. Smith

When asked to grade the public schools, 46% of respondents give their community's schools honor marks while only 22% award an A or B to the nation's schools (Table 1). But how can this be when a national sample of people rating local schools is in effect rating a representative sample of schools in the country? Since in the aggregate the parts make up the whole, how can people think the parts are much better than the whole? If this was an isolated result, we'd have an anomaly. But since this outcome occurs repeatedly and consistently—it was found in every pair of over 60 survey items analyzed—we are instead dealing with a well-established pattern. How can we reconcile the inconsistency of the comparison with the consistency of the results? We'll examine this conundrum by first reviewing the empirical results and then consider a series of factors that might explain the disparity between local and national evaluations.

Table 2 offers comparisons in which some aspect is evaluated on both the community and national levels. Some involve judgments about how conditions have changed in recent years. In these cases the local over national edge ranges from +14 to +35 percentage points and averages +21.9 points (i.e., the percent saying that a problem increased nationally minus the percent saying it increased locally). Another 52 items compared current evaluations of local and national conditions. The local edge ranges from +8 points to +65 points and averages 29.7 percentage points.

The local/national differences are both quite substantial and robust. First, the local advantage prevails in all topical areas: crime and violence, drug abuse, moral standards and ethics, poverty, race relations, unemployment, churches, family, schools, and the environment. However, the magnitude of the effect varies; since question wordings are not standardized across topics, it is not possible to credit the differences in magnitude just to the issues covered.

Second, the differences are consistent across surveys. Two *Washington Post* surveys in the summer of 1996 show virtually identical results, and adjoining surveys

by Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa on school comparisons are very similar.

Third, the pattern shows up across different questionnaire contexts. The local advantage prevails over national ratings regardless of question orders (i.e., local/national, national/local, split ballots).

The Parts Don't Equal the Whole

First of all, national evaluations by a representative sample of people should be equivalent to local evaluations by a representative sample when the condition being rated exists in local communities and is distributed roughly proportional to the population. Examples of such circumstances would be public schools and crime. The quality of public schools in the country should be the sum of the quality of all individual schools weighted by student population. Similarly, the change in the level of crime nationwide should be the same as the change of crime in a representative sample of communities weighted by population size.

However, in other situations the match between the parts and the whole is not so direct. The correspondence between the national and local evaluations will breakdown when: 1) the problem is not distributed across the country proportional to the population; 2) people think of different aspects of the problem when different levels are specified; or 3) a national problem has little or no local manifestations.

Problems that occur in relatively unpopulated areas might be seen as greater nationally than locally since in the aggregate, local judgments are proportional to the population, but the national judgments are not so constrained. Thus, few people could say that wilderness preservation was a problem in their neighborhood or community (since few areas include wilderness and few people live in areas that include wildernesses), but many people might consider wilderness preservation a national problem. Or people may

Table 1
Ratings of Local Schools Compared to Ratings of Schools in the Nation as a Whole

Question: Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools in your neighborhood... A, B, C, D, or Fail? How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally... A, B, C, D, or Fail?

	<u>Community</u>	<u>Nation</u>
A	10%	2%
B	36	20
C	32	48
D	11	15
Fail	6	6
Don't Know	5	9

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, June 1997.

Table 2
For Every Attribute Measured, Local Conditions Get a More Positive Assessment Than Their National Counterpart

Changes in Conditions:			Current Conditions (cont.):		
Date	Topic	Ratings	Date	Topic	Ratings
[Issue] has increased or worsened			Being pleased with [issue]		
May 1993	Crime	+15	January 1996	Churches	+18
January 1994	Crime	+13	January 1996	Economic Situation	+39
January 1996	Crime	+13	January 1996	Ethics & moral conditions	+36
May 1996	Teenage crime	+26	January 1996	Family life/American family	+43
May 1995	School violence	+31	January 1996	Schools	+18
June 1996	Racial tensions	+35	May 1997	Quality of Education	+12 ²
July 1996	Racial tensions	+32			
October 1997	Racial tensions	+16			
Current Conditions:			Give schools a grade of A or B		
[Issue] is a big or serious problem			Rating of Environmental Problems (on a scale of 1 to 10)		
June 1996	Crime	+63	May 1996	Non-public schools	+8
July 1996	Crime	+65	May 1981	Public schools	+16
June 1996	Drug abuse	+56	May 1982	Public schools	+15
July 1996	Drug abuse	+55	May 1983	Public schools	+12
March 1997	Drug abuse	+47 ¹	May 1984	Public schools	+17
June 1996	Moral standards	+44	May 1985	Public schools	+16
July 1996	Moral standards	+46	April 1986	Public schools	+13
June 1996	Poverty	+46	April 1987	Public schools	+17
July 1996	Poverty	+50	April 1988	Public schools	+17
June 1996	Black racism	+25	May 1989	Public schools	+21
July 1996	Black racism	+27	May 1991	Public schools	+21
June 1996	Racism	+41	August 1992	Public schools	+22
July 1996	Racism	+42	May 1993	Public schools	+28
June 1996	White racism	+24	May 1994	Public schools	+22
July 1996	White racism	+24	May 1995	Public schools	+21
June 1996	Unemployment	+28	May 1996	Public schools	+22
July 1996	Unemployment	+28	March 1997	Public schools	+21
June 1996	Violence	+66	June 1997	Public schools	+24
July 1996	Violence	+67			
[Issues] are good					
April 1996	Public schools	+9	September 1996	1-5	+12
October 1996	Public schools	+9	September 1996	1-5	+22
May 1992	Race relations	+50	September 1996	1-5	+11
December 1996	Race relations	+42			
June 1997	Race relations	+34			

¹ Parents of teens ages 12-17

² Registered voters.

Note: For each item shown, respondents were asked to rate the issue on both the local and national levels. In the "ratings" column a "+" indicates the local community received higher marks for the more socially desirable attribute. Full question wording and complete source citations are available through the Roper Center's POLL Database.

judge a single occurrence in a single locality as constituting a serious national problem. Examples might be an unsafe nuclear reactor (e.g., Three Mile Island) or a high profile espionage case.

Additionally, a national sample of sub-units will not aggregate to represent the whole when the target of the evaluation differs by level. If one asked separately about political corruption in local, state, and federal governments, then there

Local vs. National

would be no basis to aggregate the sub-units to represent the whole since each judgment would be on a separate level of government. Moreover, people may make their judgments on non-comparable groups even when that's not formally the case. Suppose that the question asked about political corruption in one's community, state, and the country as a whole. One might argue that the national judgment should then be the average of the local or state evaluations as in prior examples. But this is unlikely for two reasons. First, people are likely to confound levels of government with geographical levels. Their assessments of local political corruption are likely to be largely a judgment about local government (i.e., city or county offices and officials) and not all levels of government that are located or represented in their local area. Second, it is particularly unlikely that presidential corruption would be counted as part of their local or state assessments, since most people would probably consider the president as outside (or above) their community or state and not covered by their consideration of these sub-national units.

Moreover, some national and international problems have no local analogy; these issues include foreign affairs, the space program, and presidential leadership. One cannot meaningfully ask about such problems on the local level. (One could ask about community/neighborhood concern about these matters, but not what grade you'd give foreign affairs in your community or whether the space exploration program has improved in your neighborhood). However, the reverse is less true. The most parochial of problems (sidewalk repairs, relations between neighbors, zoning) could be asked in terms of the locality and the country. However, an item on the condition of sidewalks in the community would presumably make more sense than the parallel one on the condition of sidewalks in the country.

In sum, there are various conditions under which the local evaluations would not have to match the national judgments. However, such misalignments

between local judgments weighted by population and the national judgments are unlikely to occur for most issues. None of the items in Table 2 actually appears to be a strong example of a non-comparable item.

Input Shapes Outlook

A second and more general reason for divergence in local and national estimates has to do with the different information on which assessments are made. Knowledge of conditions in the neighborhood primarily comes from personal observation and direct communication

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among family members, neighbors, and other friends and acquaintances. Little information at this level probably comes from the mass media. For the local community, knowledge comes less from personal observation and close informants and more from less intimate informants and from the mass media (mostly local). For the country as the whole, little comes from personal observation and close informants, and most from the local and especially national mass media. Thus, the data input for each judgment is different in both mode as well as origin.

The differences in inputs may shape evaluations in several ways:

Biased media coverage of topics. If the media highlight problems and conflict more than successes and cooperation and give the greatest attention to the

rarest but most sensational manifestation of problems (e.g., the West Paducah, Jonesboro, and Springfield killings), then one's information will substantiate the conclusion that it's worse "out there" (i.e., outside the neighborhood or community) than it is locally.

Biased media coverage. Big cities are probably covered more than smaller areas due to major newspapers and TV stations being located there. It is more economical to cover stories in big cities.

Biased news retention. People may tend to retain negative or sensational stories more than ordinary stories. If there are a 100 stories about schools (reports of human interest events, school board elections, bilingual programs, changes in test scores, drug use, athletic accomplishments, and school killings), does what is remembered disproportionately represent the atypical and sensational rather than the typical and mundane?

Personal Biases Color Evaluations

Third, people may have certain perceptual biases that color their evaluations. Hometown favoritism, for example, may lead people to consider their community as superior to other communities and by extension to think less of the country as a whole since it is made up largely of "other communities." After all, even Garrison Keillor's self-effacing Norwegians think Lake Wobegone is superior to Millet and that all of their children are above average.

As one moves from neighborhood out to the country as a whole, one moves from personal contacts to non-contacts. The neighborhood is most likely populated by friends, family, and acquaintances but their proportion of the national population is minuscule; for the nation as a whole, 99%+ of the population are strangers.

Neighborhoods also tend to be homogenous. They are typically racially segregated and usually separated by SES and often by other variables such as life

cycle and religion. Thus people in one's neighborhood and, to a lesser extent, one's community are more like the respondent than those outside their local areas. Since people tend to evaluate people like themselves more positively than members of out-groups, it follows that people would tend to think of areas populated with people like themselves more positively and thus might rate local or similar areas more highly than more remote or dissimilar areas.

Big city bias can color evaluations. People probably give more weight to stories about big cities than to news from smaller areas (because they know the cities are bigger and therefore deserve more attention). For example, a bad report on schools in Chicago would be given more weight than a report of good schools in Oak Park. But if Oak Park is a representative example of suburban schools, then giving it less attention may be wrong since suburban schools collectively may have more students and/or serve a larger population than city schools. Some evidence of such a bias comes from an item on risk of crime. Low risk is rated at 63% in one's neighborhood, 44% in one's city or town, 6% for the "largest city in your state," and 9% for the country as a whole. The similarity between the biggest city ratings and the national ratings (and their great differences from local areas) may result from people rating the country in terms of what they believe prevails in large cities.

Furthermore, problems in large units may be seen as more serious or larger because the unit is larger. For example, there's obviously more crime in the nation than in any community because the whole is bigger than any sub-part. People may be unable or unwilling to think in terms of crimes per capita, and instead

make the judgment that crime in the nation is worse because in the absolute sense there's more of it. Thus, people may think that murder is more serious in the country than in their community because there were 24,000 murders nationwide, but only 20 in their community of 100,000, even though that represents 9.3 murders per 100,000 in the US and 20 per 100,000 in their city. This tendency might be particularly prevalent if the question stresses a criterion such as seriousness, or the "bigness" of a problem that is associated in people's minds (and judgments) with the nation rather than sub-units.

While all of the extant examples indicate that the country is rated more negatively than a sample of its communities, it is possible that the nation is not just thought of as worse-off than localities, but as differing in other aspects from local areas. For example, people may see the nation as more pluralistic than the sum of its neighborhoods because much of the cultural variety that exists is between neighborhoods, not just within them. Or people may think that the nation is less dull or more exciting than the sum of its communities, because while nothing may be occurring in particular communities (e.g., no festivals) there are events, peak occurrences, and new attractions somewhere in the country continually.

The results suggest that people view what is theirs, near, little, and/or part as better than what is others, away, big, and/or whole. But perhaps people also view the local as more limited or restricted and the national as broader and more open. If the latter is true (at least in part), the advantage that local has over national should disappear when the evaluated dimension taps something related to openness, variety, or similar

aspects. However, in the dozens of existing comparisons no questions appear that find the nation better-off than its parts. This of course may be only because the right dimensions were not covered.

The comparability of local and national evaluations, differences in informational inputs, and various perceptual perspectives probably interact both to create the overall effect and determine the magnitude of the effect. For example, the larger than average gap on crime, violence, and drugs may result from their association with large cities and the problems of large cities may be highlighted in the public's mind due to both disproportionate media coverage as well as the public giving more weight to news about these areas. Similarly, research on context effects suggests that people are more likely to oversample extreme exemplars when they are making judgments about general rather than specific questions and the national/local dimension may show a similar dynamic. In addition, there will be more extreme exemplars for the national than for local evaluations.

Summary

The country is consistently judged to be more troubled than the neighborhoods and communities that comprise it. This divergence tells us something important about how society is seen and evaluated. Because of a difference in inputs and certain perceptual biases, people see the local as better off than the national. Both perspectives are real and valid ways of assessing the state of society and both should be measured to have a full understanding of perceived social conditions. To understand how serious problems are considered to be, one must assess them at both the national and local levels.



*Tom W. Smith is director,
General Social Survey,
National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.*