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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

**Bowling Alone?: Civil society may not be in such bad shape. By
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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2006

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Bowling Alone?

Civil society may not be in such bad shape

Five years ago, an odd funeral procession wended its way through the streets of Chicago. “We started at a church, and had a service,” recalls Nancy Aardema, executive director of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, the human services nonprofit that organized the funeral. “And then we marched through our alderman’s street fair until we got to the center of Logan Square. We had 300 people, all walking single file.”

“I personally cried. That is how powerful the funeral was,” she says.

The ceremony was not for a community leader or a beloved resident, but for affordable housing. The median price of a home in Logan Square is \$300,000 – a sum too high for most of the neighborhood’s predominantly Latino residents.

Affordable housing in Logan Square may indeed be dead, but the civil society in Chicago is decidedly alive, says Aardema. A recent article in the *American Journal of Sociology* (November 2005) suggests that she might be right.

Synthesizing 30 years’ worth of newspaper reports on collective civic actions – from blood drives and pancake breakfasts to war protests and charitable marathons – the researchers conclude that in Chicago, the number of these events has remained stable, rather than declined, as is commonly thought. Although the authors examined collective actions only in Chicago, “I think we’ve tapped into a general phenomenon” that extends to the nation as a whole, says Robert J. Sampson, a professor of sociology at Harvard University and



The annual number of Chicago’s collective civic actions, such as the 2005 Chicago Marathon, has held steady for three decades.

the study’s lead author. The study’s other authors include Doug McAdam of Stanford University, Heather MacIndoe of the University of Chicago, and Simón Weffer-Elizondo of Harvard University.

The researchers also demonstrate that the more nonprofits a neighborhood has, the more collective actions it hosts. “The density of nonprofit organizations is a much better predictor of collective civic engagement than are social class, race, density, or even the traditional indicators of social ties in the community,” such as number of friendships, Sampson says.

Sampson and his colleagues’ findings contradict popular wisdom and scholarly work – most notably sociol-

ogist Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* – that says that Americans are turning their backs on civil society. “Putnam has done a real service by drawing attention to what American civic life looks like,” says McAdam. “But our concern is that he might not have the best data.”

Whereas Putnam relies on measures of individual thoughts and actions – their trust in government, say, or their memberships in organizations like bowling leagues – the study’s authors argue that measures of collective action are better indicators of civil society’s health. “To get things done in society,” says Sampson, “[collective action] may well be more important than individual memberships. And so although membership in community organizations is declining, it doesn’t mean that civic engagement has been affected.”

The disagreement between these sociologists is an amicable one: “[Sampson] is one of my closest friends,” Putnam says. To reconcile their findings, he suggests, “there are some people who specialize in these civic actions, and invariably come out. But the numbers of people involved in demonstrations are but a small fraction of the population. Almost all of the work that I’ve done is meant to describe populations as a whole.”

Although Putnam is not convinced that civil society is holding steady, he agrees that “the authors have shown how important nonprofits are for collective action, especially for the most active 5 to 10 percent of the population. That group gets pulled into civil life by these organizations.” Whether the collective action of a few committed citizens is enough to win social change, however, is another sociological debate. —*Alana Conner Snibbe*