CHAPTER 10

The Neighborhood and Beyond

DISCUSSION

The research shows that neighborhoods are indeed communities of limited liability. People are attached to their own neighborhood and they also have commitments in the wider community. However, different groups of people are attached to their neighborhoods in different ways and for diverse reasons.

In order to explore the determinants of neighborhood involvement and the strength of communal ties, a choice-constraint model of human behavior was used. The model is based on the recognition that people's behavior is constrained by factors such as their socioeconomic status and that these constraints directly affect the choices upon which people have to act.

The model provided a useful framework in which to study community questions. Age, income, race, ethnicity, and household composition were shown to be important explanatory variables for ways in which people use the neighborhood and their attitudes toward it.

Within the framework provided by this model, the location of people's intimate ties was examined. This analysis showed that people living in all neighborhoods, even the lower-income areas, have significant external ties, and therefore the neighborhood is just one of the places in
which an individual household's locus of activity occurs. However, for those who are more restricted to place (poor, elderly, households with children), the neighborhood assumes greater importance in their lives than it does for other households.

In general, dependence upon the neighborhood lessens as people's social, physical, and economic mobility increases. As their choices expand, the neighborhood has to compete with a variety of alternative locations for the commitment and involvement of the residents. It is therefore not surprising that the communal aspects of the neighborhood are related to the characteristics of the residents and their opportunity to participate in the wider community.

These findings show that some people choose to become involved in the neighborhood because the neighborhood offers a superior option for social interaction, shopping, worship, and the like. Others—the elderly, the poor, and blacks—are more place-bound and may use the neighborhood simply because it is their only alternative.

People, having options of where to spend their time and energy, will only be drawn into a neighborhood if it meets their needs. Therefore, in one sense, neighborhoods may be thought of as being in competition with one another. If a neighborhood offers a better product than alternative locations, it will draw its residents inward; if it does not, they will go outside of the neighborhood to meet their needs and satisfy their wants.

Neighborhood life has a variety of dimensions, and where these features of the neighborhood—personal, physical, and institutional—offer strong inducements for involvement, communal feelings will be high. When neighborhoods provide disincentives for involvement by their residents, the sense of community will be low. Therefore, the neighborhood, and not just the residents, plays an important role in constructing community. The community can be strong in neighborhoods in which residents have extensive external ties if it encourages involvement,