

It's not just Rand Paul's street: Americans are a lot less neighborly than they used to be

By **Christopher Ingraham** November 7 at 3:12 PM

Sen. Rand Paul sustained five broken ribs after an assault by a neighbor last weekend. The alleged assailant, Rene Boucher, released a statement through his lawyer calling the incident “a very regrettable dispute between two neighbors over a matter that most people would regard as trivial.”

People familiar with the situation have told reporters that a disagreement over yard waste may be to blame. A resident of the gated community where the assault happened told the New York Times that “if you can afford to live out here, you tend to your own business.”

Tending exclusively to your own business, it seems, is the preference of more and more Americans these days.

In 2016, the share of Americans who say they “never” socialize with their neighbors hit an all-time high of 34 percent, according to the General Social Survey. That number's been rising steadily since 1974, when just 21 percent said they never hang out with their neighbors.

The communities we choose to live in play a significant role in how much we interact with our neighbors. You might expect that densely populated cities foster neighborly friendships, but in fact the opposite appears to be true: People living in cities are the most likely to avoid spending time with their neighbors completely, while those in small towns and rural areas are the least likely.

We often think of cities as fertile grounds for social interactions between neighbors and acquaintances who spontaneously bump into one another on the street, sharing news, gossip and camaraderie. But the numbers above suggest that a sizable portion of city-dwellers are determined to avoid interacting with the people who live nearby — or, perhaps, that the circumstances of their lives are so hectic as to forestall most neighborly interaction.

Still, compared with 40 years ago, neighborliness is waning in small towns just as much as it is in big cities. There are a lot of different factors driving this trend, as [outlined in a 2015 City Observatory report](#). We spend more time indoors, watching TV. The wealthy have walled themselves off in gated communities like the one Rand Paul lives in. “Space and experiences became more private, fueled by suburban expansion, large lots, and the predominance of single-family homes,” the City Observatory’s authors write.


Trust is declining, too. The General Social Survey’s data shows that the share of Americans saying most people can be trusted has fallen from nearly 50 percent in the 1970s to just over 30 percent today.

That lack of trust extends to our neighbors: In 2016 [nearly half of Americans told the Pew Research Center](#) that they trust only “some” or “none” of their neighbors. Mirroring the numbers on social interactions above, the survey found that people in rural areas were most trusting of their neighbors, while those in urban areas trusted their neighbors the least.

These trends may be self-reinforcing: We trust our neighbors less because we’re interacting less frequently with them, and we’re interacting less frequently with them because we trust them less.

“Good fences make good neighbours,” Robert Frost’s neighbor said in his 1914 poem “[Mending Wall](#).” For more and more Americans, it seems, the best neighbor is one you don’t have to interact with at all.

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Christopher Ingraham writes about politics, drug policy and all things data. He previously worked at the Brookings Institution and the Pew Research Center.  Follow [@_cingraham](#)

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suezen 4 hours ago

You promote hate and fear, you shouldn't be surprised to get hate and fear.

Lie down with dogs, wake up with fleas.

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newmoonrising 6 hours ago

We also don't live where we work anymore. The workplace is a good place to form friendships. But in the age of the commuter, our friends may be an hours drive away. School and church are the few things that bring us together with others close by. But if we don't have school kids and don't go to a local place of worship we don't have those ties either.

This may be why the divisiveness we see now is so prevalent.

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lana_st 6 hours ago

Well duh. This is why the myth of "multiculturalism" is so absurd. Keeping a nation together is hard when you've destroyed social cohesion and people no longer have common interests but directly competing ones.

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bravecat 7 hours ago

Here, we have two people who - as with many physicians - believe they're above the law. One doesn't follow community guidelines that he personally agreed to prior to moving into the community. Another doesn't follow laws concerning how to treat other people. They deserve each other. At least they're stuck being neighbors and out of our way.

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texanmd 4 hours ago

As a physician, I think your generalization that many physicians feel that they are above the law is a bit unfair. You can not even believe the number of rules and regulations that I have to follow from the FDA, DEA, the State Board, Federal Health Laws, HIPAA rules, CMS, Medicare, commercial health insurers, State Dept of Public Safety, and a few others I cannot remember in order to practice my livelihood and feed my family and pay my bills. I had to get fingerprinted to get my license. If I violate any number of state laws, I could lose my license for something unrelated. I have to keep current on licensing, education, malpractice insurance and other things more than any other profession I know. And somehow you think I consider myself above the law? Honestly I am stuck right in the middle of the whole pile of crap of regulation that constitutes the practice of medicine these days that has little to do with good patient care. Save your generalizations for politicians, or wealthy businessmen, or athletes/celebrities that contribute little to the common good but stay off the backs of the doctors as there is little room left there.

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frankspeaks 8 hours ago

generally true in the liberal bastions...but out here in the hinterland things remain pretty much the same...

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suezen 4 hours ago

Wish there was a downvote for garbage like this. Being nice to neighbors is just civilized, whatever your politics.

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jrgordonfla 8 hours ago

I love these polls and the hype that they provide journalists. I often wonder who and where they actually asked Americans about such subjects. In places where I have lived (urban, suburban, semi-rural) people are open and friendly to a neighbor. Now, if I repeatedly acted poorly to a neighbor, I would not expect friendship but I do my best to avoid such behavior.

In my opinion, in spite of the media's efforts to divide the country and set one group against another, most citizens ignore such efforts and attempt, the majority of the time, to follow the so-called 'golden rule'.

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perspektiv 10 hours ago

A problem with the analysis in this article is that "neighborhood" is defined in terms of physical proximity. Much of what can be unpleasant about a "neighborhood" is linked to physical location - noise, nomadic pets and children, unintended transfer of debris.

However, most of us now live in a world in which the vast majority of our voluntary contact with other human beings - even when we are at home - is handled electronically. We pick and choose, and presumably choose what is pleasant, rewarding and reinforcing. Our electronic "neighbors" - people we feel "close to" - are not likely to correspond to the people whose residences are located near ours through accidental (though not entirely random) real estate transactions.

In this sense, physical neighborhoods are at a significant natural disadvantage on anyone's lovability scale. No wonder we do our best to retreat from physical neighborhoods into electronic ones.

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LitTeacher 11 hours ago

Many of the things that used to bring neighbors together no longer do. For example, in my DC neighborhood, people send their children to a variety of public, charter and private schools, so kids don't walk to school together. When we needed a babysitter, none of the high school kids in the neighborhood wanted to do it. People used to mow their lawns and clean up their yards on the weekend which was a great opportunity for bumping into each other, but now most people hire landscaping companies. In the summer, kids go to camp rather than hang out in the neighborhood.

There is no community pool. There just aren't as many activities that naturally bring people together.

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streetnoise 11 hours ago *(Edited)*

Neighbors are an accident of real estate, totally uncontrollable and often transient in many places. And that would be the ones you like. It would be great to be able to live where you can pick your neighbors!

Then, there are the ayeholes with barking dogs and screaming kids. Americans used to remain in their homes longer, which builds relationships. So too, the last 20 years have seen an influx into neighborhoods of people from cultures and countries we don't want or have time to work to understand.

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