

# ***Neighbourhood Houses in Metro Vancouver [www.nhproject.ca](http://www.nhproject.ca)***

## **SOCIAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE INVOLVEMENT**

**BY SEAN R. LAUER**

---

Funded by SSHRC (Grant No: 435-2012-1276), the NHIMV project explores the contributions of neighbourhood houses to local communities. Neighbourhood houses have a long history of operation in Vancouver, dating back to 1938. They began as part of the Settlement House Movement made famous in North America by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. While time and distance have created differences to that early model, the houses remain neighbourhood-based, locally governed, multi-service, community development oriented organizations. Visit [www.nhvproject.ca](http://www.nhvproject.ca) for more information.

This research brief asks if neighbourhood houses contribute to the social capacity of individuals who use their facilities and participate in their programs and activities. By social capacity, we are referring to people's abilities to work with others in order to reach shared goals. As part of the NHIMV project, we conducted survey research in February and March of 2014 at 15 neighbourhood houses located in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Respondents were recruited through requests made on the premises of the neighbourhood houses on randomly selected days, in order to reach a target population of all neighbourhood house users in the Metro Vancouver area. In total, we collected questionnaires from 687 users.

---

### **Neighbourhood Houses and Social Capacity**

Neighbourhood houses provide users with opportunities to work alongside a diverse group of other neighbourhood house users in ways that build social capacity. Houses offer a wide variety of programs, including childcare groups, English as a second language courses, tutorial groups for students, and employment counseling. These service oriented programs alone are not what make the houses unique; the houses also combine these services with cultural and other expressive activities. For instance, neighbourhood houses often hold art classes and displays, and organize local music groups and performances. Mutual help groups for women and seniors provide social venues for people with similar needs to network. Group meals are often organized with the goal of bridging cultural differences

### ***Key Findings***

*A majority of our sample reported increases in their knowledge about neighbourhood issues and social skills through neighbourhood house involvement.*

*Increases in knowledge and skills are particularly prevalent among those born outside Canada.*

through the sharing of culinary traditions. Cultural events and festival celebrations are often regular features of the houses' monthly programming.

Participation in these varied programs, events, and activities is an ideal way for users to develop their social capacities.

# Neighbourhood Houses in Metro Vancouver [www.nhproject.ca](http://www.nhproject.ca)

Table 1. Perceived Changes in Social Skills through Involvement at Neighbourhood Houses

<i>Change in social skills due to involvement in neighbourhood houses</i>	Place of Birth					
	Total		Canada		Outside Canada	
	<i>Increase d a little</i>	<i>Increase d a lot</i>	<i>Increase d a little</i>	<i>Increase d a lot</i>	<i>Increase d a little</i>	<i>Increase d a lot</i>
Has your knowledge of neighbourhood issues changed?	48	35	42	32	51	36
Has your ability to work with people from different backgrounds changed?	42	34	34	29	46	38
Have your decision making abilities changed?	42	26	30	19	48	29
Have your skills in regard to organizing or managing events and programs changed?	36	21	24	17	42	23
Have your skills in speaking in front of other people changed?	35	27	22	19	42	32

All figures shown are percentages. All differences between place of birth are statistically significant.

## Building Social Capacity

We asked respondents to consider five different social skills and whether or not their abilities had increased in these areas through their involvement with the neighbourhood house. The findings are presented in Table 1, which shows that a large majority of respondents saw increases in their knowledge and skills. The largest increases are seen in knowledge about neighbourhood issues, with a total of 83% of respondents seeing some increase in this area. Increases in ability to work with people from different backgrounds were reported by 76% of respondents. The percentages decrease slightly when considering decision making abilities, management skills, and the ability to speak in front of others. However, the majority of respondents still reported increases of a little or a lot in these skills.

## Comparing Place of Birth

Neighbourhood houses are often located in diverse neighborhoods. Their work provides a welcoming space for newcomers to Canada to find a place in their communities. In our sample, 66% of the respondents were born outside Canada. Table 1 shows that these respondents report much larger increases in their knowledge and skills than those born in Canada. For instance, 74% of participants born outside Canada report increases in their ability to speak in front of others, compared with only 41% of those born in Canada.