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Metamorphosis



How a Belonging Community Nurtures Families and Children

A young child's social environment is an important predictor of his or her health and well-being. We usually think of family as the most central factor in children's well-being, but young children fare better when they are raised in communities where families are not only connected to each other, but also to local institutions, such as local media and community organizations.

When these connections are strong, residents, local media, and community organizations create a **belonging community** — where people feel positive about and attached to their residential area, but also act on those feelings by engaging in neighborly behaviors.

Such feelings and behaviors are captured in a validated belonging scale developed by the Metamorphosis Project at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California (<http://www.metamorph.org>). Respondents answer the following questions, and can define a 'neighbor' for themselves:

- How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to ask them to keep watch on your house or apartment?
- How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to ask for a ride?
- How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to talk with them about a personal problem?
- How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to ask for their assistance in making a repair?
- How interested are you in knowing what your neighbors are like?
- How much do you enjoy meeting and talking with your neighbors?
- How often do your neighbors borrow things from you or your family?
- How easy is it to become friends with your neighbors?



When trying to create a **belonging community**, the most important thing is for families to be part of a local **storytelling network** where neighborhood issues, problems and opportunities are discussed. When people share neighborhood stories, they share common understandings that can motivate them to access local resources or to come together to improve their neighborhood environments.

Community Belonging is Built by:

- Neighbors talking to each other about the neighborhood
- Local media that tell stories about the neighborhood and connect families with news and information about community resources
- Community organizations that bring residents together and stimulate conversation about shared concerns
- Creating strong connections between residents, media, and community organizations to form a **storytelling network**. You can find out more about the storytelling network in Metamorphosis Brief #3, “Storytelling Strategies for Reaching your Target Community” available at: http://www.metamorph.org/our_research_findings/

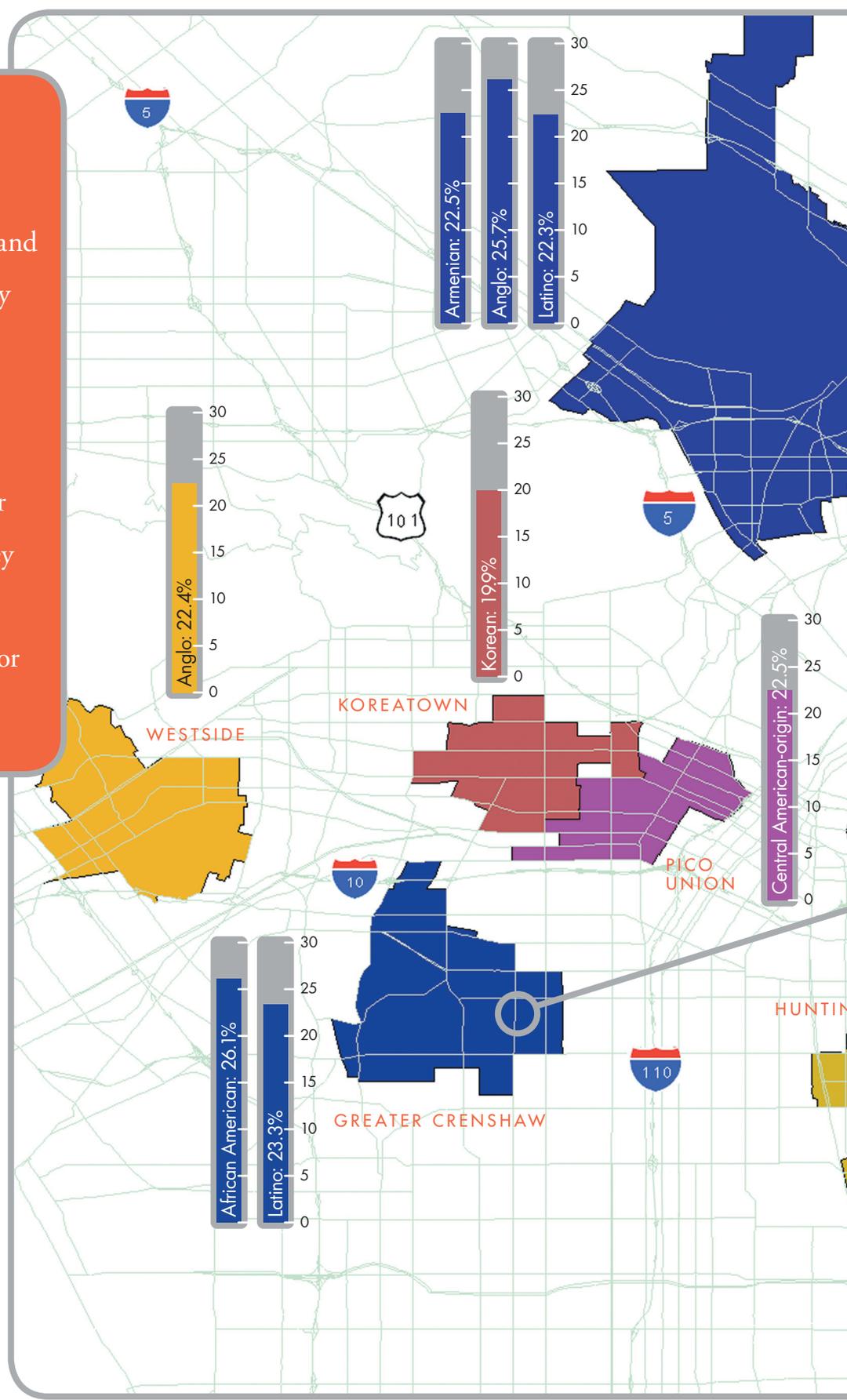
Communities with low levels of community belonging are communities where local media, community organizations, and residents are not well connected to each other in the storytelling network. In these communities,

- Community organizations are not well connected to the residents
- Local media do not tell enough local stories
- Residents don't meet in local 'meeting and greeting places' to talk about the community

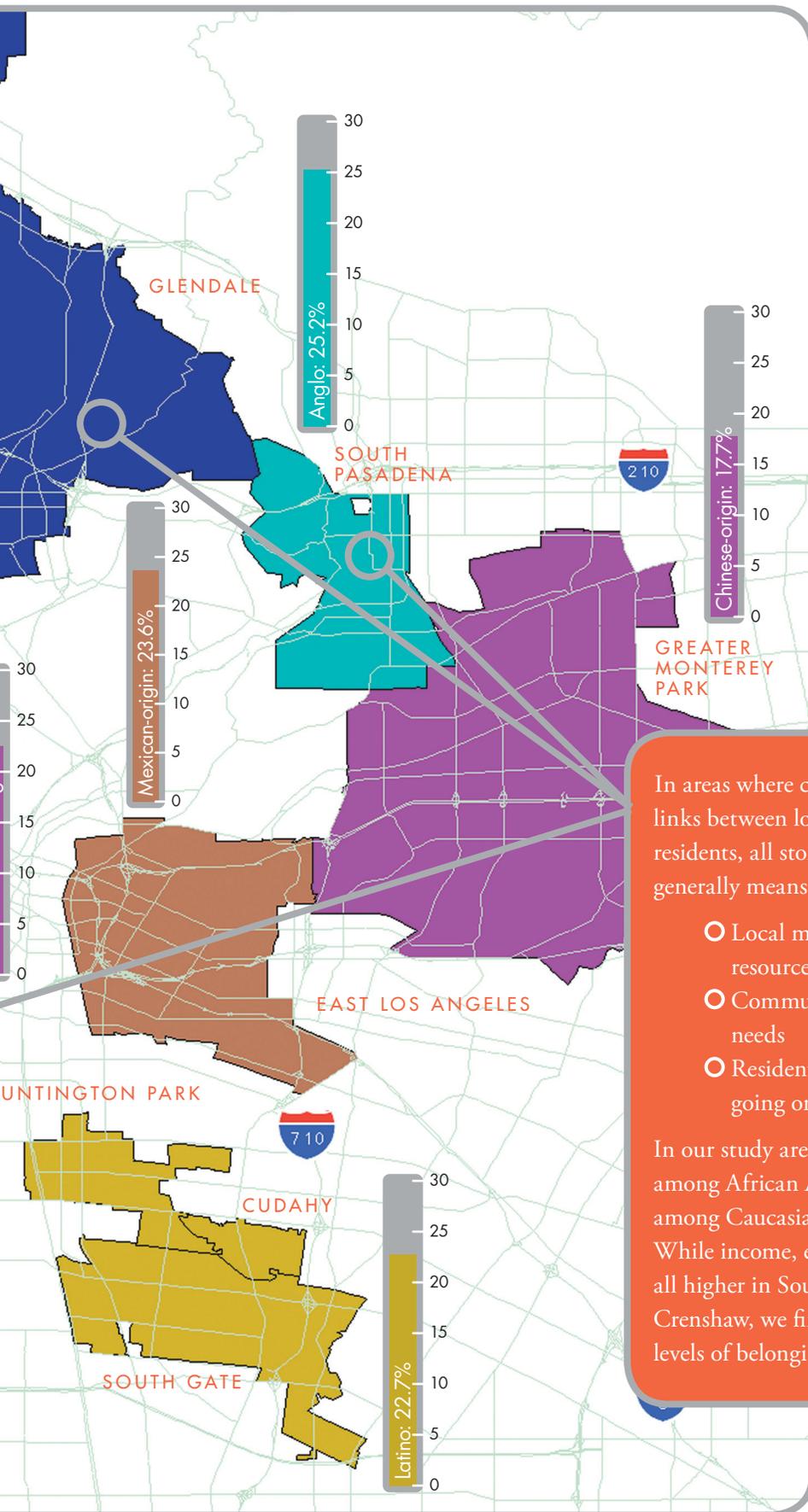


Our study populations, shown on this map, all reside in Los Angeles County. The belonging index score ranges from 0 to 30.

“Neighborhood belonging” has been shown to help build relationships of mutual trust and reciprocity among community members. For parents in particular, being a member of a belonging community may fortify their emotional or practical resources so that they can create a supportive and healthy family environment for their children.



All report different levels of community belonging. Ranges from 0 (lowest) to 60 (highest).



In areas where community belonging is high, we find strong links between local media, community organizations, and residents, all storytelling about their neighborhood. This generally means that:

- Local media are connecting residents with community resources and organizations
- Community organizations are responsive to residents' needs
- Residents meet and talk with each other about what is going on in the neighborhood

In our study areas, we found the highest levels of belonging among African American residents of Greater Crenshaw, and among Caucasian residents in South Pasadena and Glendale. While income, education, and levels of homeownership are all higher in South Pasadena and Glendale than in Greater Crenshaw, we find that when the storytelling network is strong, levels of belonging are high.

Metamorphosis Project's Belonging Scale

The 2005 Los Angeles County Health Survey used the Metamorphosis Project's belonging scale to assess neighborhood belonging. The survey also included questions about parenting, so we analyzed the connections between neighborhood belonging and preferred parenting practices. We were particularly interested in parenting practices that can affect the quality of young children's lives.

In Table 1 we compare high belonging parents (top third) with low belonging parents (bottom third) in terms of their parenting practices.

Parents' ability to access resources they need can affect the quality of children's lives. We would expect high belonging parents are more connected to and knowledgeable about the community than low belonging parents.

- An important parental resource is having someone you can go to for child rearing advice. The percentage of parents who found it "very" or "somewhat" easy to find someone to talk to about raising children was 83.5% in the high belonging group compared to 71.7% in the low belonging group.

TABLE 1

Child Health Indicators	Low Belonging	High Belonging	Level of Significance
Child read to daily by parent or family member	43.1%	56.1%	<0.001
Television: Age appropriate viewing (6 mos to 5 yrs)	59.1%	65.6%	0.02
Easy to find someone to discuss child rearing advice	71.7%	83.5%	<0.001
Easy to find child care when needed	60.2%	71.5%	<0.001
Safe park/Playground that is easily accessible	84.0%	88.9%	0.02

Source: 2005 Los Angeles County Health Survey; Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

We wanted to know if the strong community connections that characterize high belonging are associated with preferred parenting practices. Overall, the survey found statistically significant relationships between some key parenting practices and neighborhood belonging.

- The percentage of children read to daily was significantly higher for high belonging parents, 56.1% vs. 43.1% for low belonging parents.
- TV watching was categorized based on the age-appropriate recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics—no TV viewing for children under 2 years old, and less than 3 hours per day of TV viewing for children two years and older. Children of high belonging parents were more likely than low belonging parents to be within the recommended levels of TV watching (65.6% vs. 59.1%, respectively).



- More parents in the high belonging group (71.5%) reported that it was “very” or “somewhat” easy to find childcare when they needed it than in the low belonging group (60.2%).
- And finally, 88.9% of parents in the high belonging group reported that they had easy access to a safe park or playground compared to 84% of parents in the low belonging group.

These relationships between belonging and parenting practices hold even when we take income into account. In other words, belonging goes hand in hand with preferred parenting practices in lower and higher income groups.

This is an encouraging finding for the potential health and family benefits of building **belonging communities**. This can be done with professional interventions, but residents and their local institutions working together can also create belonging communities that benefit families and children.

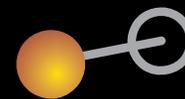
The Metamorphosis Project strategy is to focus efforts on strengthening connections between residents, local media, and community organizations so that they become a strong neighborhood storytelling network that can endure the ups and downs of community life.



WHAT IS the Metamorphosis Project?

The Metamorphosis Project was born in 1992, in large part as a result of the uprisings that shook Los Angeles. Dr. Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, the developer of Metamorphosis, knew that as a communication researcher, she should have something to contribute to policymakers and practitioners trying to bring about social change that enables stronger communities.

The Metamorphosis Project—Transforming the Ties that Bind, was officially launched in 1998 at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California (USC). Metamorphosis has conducted research on African Americans and Latinos in Greater Crenshaw; Anglos on the Westside and in Pasadena; ethnic Chinese groups in Greater Monterey Park; Koreans in Koreatown; Latinos in East LA, Pico Union, Huntington Park, Cudahy, and Southgate; and Anglos, Latinos, and Armenians in Glendale.



Metamorphosis

For more information on what Metamorphosis has been doing and the projects we are currently engaged in, please visit our Web site: <http://www.metamorph.org>.

If you have questions or comments, please contact The Metamorphosis Project via e-mail at meta@metamorph.org or via telephone at (213) 740-1260.

