

**Report on Survey of Cohousing Communities 2011**  
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**Sponsored by the Cohousing Association of the United States (Coho/US)**

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## Introduction

Cohousing is a form of collaborative housing designed to emphasize social contact among community members while preserving and respecting individual privacy. Private homes, which contain all the features of conventional homes, are built within a compound that affords easy access to extensive common facilities such as open space, courtyards, a playground and a common house. The common house is the center of most cohousing communities. Typically it includes a large dining room and kitchen, recreational facilities for adults and children, a guest room, and workshops.

The cohousing idea originated in Denmark in the mid-twentieth century and was introduced to the U.S. in the nineteen-

nineties. Now, in 2011, there are 118 cohousing built communities in the U.S. and an equal number in various stages of formation and construction. The majority of cohousing communities are on the west (43%) and east (38%) coasts. They tend to be located near large cities or in university towns.

In 2010, the Board of the Cohousing Association of the United States began a three-phase research project in order to better serve its existing constituency, assist those wishing to form new communities, and promote the value of cohousing. This report describes the first phase, an extensive survey to gain more information about existing cohousing communities, and a second phase of three open-ended questions.

### Methodology

The first phase focused on the communities themselves. It consisted of a sixty-question community survey designed in 2010 by the Association's Research Committee. It asked questions covering a broad range of basic data about the communities and questions relating to their economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The data was collected from November 2010 to March 2011. Using listings in the Directory of Communities on the Coho/US website ([www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org)), volunteers sent emails to the contact persons listed there. Eighty out of the one-hundred and eighteen built communities, slightly over two-thirds, responded to the survey. Comparing these eighty communities with what we know (from the Directory) about the communities that did not respond to our emails and phone calls, we found a slightly higher rate of response from the East coast communities and a lower response from communities with 20 to 24 and 30 to 34 units.

In the second phase, we asked cohousers from each community to meet and respond to three open-ended questions at meetings. These meetings did not occur. Instead, these questions were not answered at all, or the contact person for the community collected answers from several, but not all, residents. Thus while these responses give a flavor of what some residents consider the benefits and challenges of living in cohousing, they cannot be taken as representative of the opinions residents hold of living in cohousing. (We have used the respondent's words as much as possible in the descriptions of their answers, only occasionally using quotation marks.) There are plans for a third phase of the project. This will be a survey of a randomly selected sample of two hundred adults living in cohousing. Here we plan to compare the answers of cohousing residents with national sample data on health and social well being.

### Results

#### *Locations, Types of Dwellings, and Forms of Home Ownership*

All eighty communities were built and occupied between 1990 and 2011. The number completed each year grew throughout the 90's and into the next decade, but has tapered off since the recession of 2008. The largest single number of cohousing communities were completed and occupied in the period 2000-2001. Consistent with US population statistics, cohousing communities reported their locations as suburban or small town (44%), urban (39%) and rural (17%).

The number of household units in each cohousing community ranges from single digits up to 67. Nearly two-thirds are

between 25 and 35 units. Most commonly these units are built as duplexes,, triplexes, and four to six units attached. Often a community will have a combination of these housing types. Only eight percent of the communities have only single-family homes and fourteen communities have more than seven units attached; these latter are usually in urban locations.

Almost all cohousing communities (87%) are organized legally as condominium associations (home owner associations); the others are cooperatives or are organized as tenants in common. Typically cohousers own their units. Only ten percent of the communities had one or more units built as rental units. Additional rental opportunities may arise when residents who move away retain ownership and rent it out or when owners rent space within their units. Most communities report a few of the latter types of rentals: fourteen communities reported between six and twenty rentals of space within units including a few owners who built “mother-in-law” apartments as part of their units.

### *Benefits of Cohousing*

Of the three open-ended questions, the one that received the most responses both in terms of their variety and number was the first: *What do you see as the three most important reasons/strengths for living in your cohousing community?* This section discusses the primary themes that emerged in responses to this open-ended question, as well as responses to multiple choice questions that supported these themes.

#### *A sense of community.*

A sense of community was one of the most frequently mentioned strengths. Cohousers wrote positively about a feeling of village life and their sense of belonging. They wrote about their every day connections to others who live nearby and whom they know well, about committed neighborly relationships, about knowing their neighbors well and sharing with them in many ways. In short they felt emotional support from the interconnectedness of their lives, and having good friends nearby who offered opportunities for easy socialization and an antidote to the fact that, for many, family may live “way too far away.”

This sense of community is generated by the many activities cohousers do together to maintain and enjoy their common facilities. All cohousing communities have a separate common space, often a separate building, called a Common House. All but a few have a dining room and kitchen where common meals are prepared and eaten together. Eighty percent of the communities have common exercise space, workshops of one kind or another, a laundry and a children's play room. Three quarters have a guest room. These facilities are usually located in the community Common House. Two-thirds also have common storage areas and half have bicycle sheds. Sharing these facilities and caring for them is a major source of the sense of community cohousers enjoy.

Cohousers wrote specifically about sharing meals, participating in basic social activities together such as watching movies, going for a walk, attending cultural events and enjoying creative day to day living where there are always opportunities for interactions and shared projects. As one person said, “it's fun.” Chief among the activities are the common meals that are prepared in the Common House kitchen and eaten in the adjoining dining room. The number of common meals per week (Table 1) ranges from occasional potlucks and other informal gatherings (less than 10% of the communities) to four or five meals a week (more than 11%).

Table1. Frequency of Common Meals

Common Meals per week	Percent of communities
One meal	24
Two meals	33
Three meals	23
Four meals	6
Five meals	5
Six or more	0
Other (potlucks, informal meals and less than one/week)	9

In over half of the communities, more than sixty percent of the residents participate in common meals, while in less than one quarter of the communities, the participation rate is less than half of the residents. These differences are meaningful because the proportion of residents attending community meals was highly correlated with several other aspects of community living: specifically, attendance at community meals and fulfillment of work responsibilities were strongly related to each other and both were negatively related to number of foreclosures that a community had experienced. The negative relationships show that the greater the attendance at meals and participation in work duties, the fewer foreclosures a community indicated on the survey. Furthermore, attendance at community meals was also negatively related to number of units in a community—the larger the community, the lower the attendance.

*Active neighboring and mutual assistance.*

Closely related to the sense of community was the fact that neighbors whom you know well are there to help out in times of need. Here cohousers wrote of cooperation, interdependence, mutual support, caring neighbors when you need them, and helping and watching out for each other. As one cohouser put it, “we both give and receive help of all kinds whether that is playmates for the children, rides to the airport, or comfort when grieving.”

In addition to meals, cohousers often form groups to share activities. Table 2 shows some typical social groups and the percentage of cohousing communities in which they meet occasionally (at least once a year) or frequently (at least once a month):

Table 2. Participation of Communities in Social Groups

Social Group	Occasional	Frequent
Book group	52%	49%
Women’s group	57%	43%
Men’s group	58%	42%
Dinner club*	35%	65%
Meditation group	39%	61%
Dance classes	60%	44%
Exercise classes	32%	68%

\*(other than community common meals)

Other regular common social activities include yoga, game nights, writing groups, singing, and movie nights.

Table 3 shows the percentage of communities engaged in social and economic sustainability measures. It reveals a high degree of social support and exchange.

Table 3. Participation of Communities in Social and Economic Sustainability Measures

Activity	Occasional	Frequent
Childcare exchange or cooperative	31%	53%
Carpooling	39%	44%
Care and support of sick or injured neighbors	37%	57%
Long term (6 mos or more) care of elderly neighbors	22%	12%
Meals support of new parents	32%	41%
Exchange or donation of services among neighbors	23%	71%
Equipment exchange or sharing among neighbors	14%	81%
Voluntary financial aid or assistance among neighbors	48%	11%
Skill sharing or training among neighbors	42%	51%
Hosting events to benefit larger community	44%	47%

In addition to the open ended questions, we asked cohousers to tell us stories about living in cohousing. One said. “I got an email from Joan who was traveling in Italy saying she had broken her foot and needed to be picked up at the airport. I couldn't get out of a work assignment that day, so I put Joan's request on our list serve and within an hour Alex said he would pick her up.” Another said “I came home from a 2-week long trip where I was surrounded by friends and family. I thought I'd feel lonely after having so much togetherness. As I got out of the car and walked to my front door upon returning from the airport, I was greeted by several neighbors. Then I noticed there was a couple showing a movie that evening in only half an hour that I really wanted to see. I was so hungry, and mentioned this, and another neighbor said I could have some of their soup during the movie. Then as I rounded the corner, a child ran up asking for a hug. I felt so welcomed home. But what's even more interesting is that this is normal and not intrusive. As it turns out, I was too exhausted to even go to the movie, and I ended up eating a bowl of cereal and going to bed at 8pm, and that was OK with everyone, too!”

*The benefits of multigenerational communities especially for children.*

When listing the benefits of cohousing several respondents wrote about living in a multi-generational community and avoiding age segregation; having an expanded immediate social network; and being connected to diverse, multi-generational, multi-family groups. All but two of the communities are multi-generational; those two are part of a new form of cohousing: senior housing. Except for these two senior communities, there is a wide spread of ages living in cohousing. Three-quarters of the communities have children aged three or under, while all have children in the 4-18 age group, averaging between ten and twenty children per community. A little over two-thirds have adopted children and one third have foster children in their communities. There is a paucity of adults in the 19-35 years age range, with 76% of the communities reporting fewer than ten residents in this category. The greatest numbers of adults are between 36 and 64 years of age. Most (78%) of the communities have residents between

65 and 80 years of age and half have a few residents over age eighty.

This spread of ages was mentioned by many who wrote of the benefits of cohousing for their children. They valued their communities because they provided nurturing, child-friendly environments where parents know their children's friends and their families and where their children have safe neighborhoods where they can be out and about on their own. As one parent put it, "my kids love it and are learning so much from being in community with a variety of people". Another parent pointed out that there were other adults to love her kids and older kids to play with, to act as role models, and to babysit. Others wrote of the support for young families and new parents who had great mentors. One said there are at least two dozen strengths just around raising kids; another said cohousing was great because it gave a sense of community and purpose for children to grow up in. One measure of how much cohousing communities value their children are the playgrounds that four-fifths of the communities have constructed for their children.

*Benefits of living in a community oriented toward sustainability.*

Living with people who shared their values and lifestyle was a strength of cohousing for many. One wrote of enjoyment in being part of a "day-to-day liberal community;" another said "I am better able to live my values." Chief among those values was the great focus of working towards a sustainable life, especially sharing resources, borrowing and lending possessions and living lighter on the earth by consuming less. It was not only each other's things that could be shared but each other's talents. Many cohousers wrote about "access to many types of resources, tools, skills, and information that one would not have in a traditional neighborhood." They appreciated the energy savings, efficient design, clustered housing, and walkability of their communities. One person mentioned the "wonderful ecological living unit," another the "cozy comfortable house" they lived in. In short, cohousing helped residents to "live more simply."

The survey gathered data on a range of innovative ecological measures that cohousing communities use in their individual units and in their Common House. A majority (53%) of communities employ solar panels for electricity in some individual units and 38% in their Common House. Approximately three-quarters of the individual units have low flow shower heads, compact fluorescent or LED light fixtures and over half employed construction energy conservation (insulation and air sealing detail above the local building code) as well as passive heating and cooling in the design. Most qualified for Energy Star certification. Other important sources of ecological sustainability commonly found in cohousing homes include triple glazed windows, local source lumber, solar hot water, and on-demand hot water heaters. A few units even use wind energy or biomass, composting toilets and geothermal heat pumps. Similar measures are also found in some cohousing common houses.

Over ninety percent of cohousing communities engage in composting and community managed recycling. Three-quarters utilize low-impact landscaping and edible landscape and/or permaculture. More than half have a rainwater catchment system and outdoor lines to dry clothes. Nearly one quarter of the communities have permanently conserved land through conservation easement.

Outside land is generally held in common and cohousing communities have developed theirs in numerous ways. Almost all of the communities have a common vegetable garden and often use the produce for common meals (94%). Most of the communities have common flower gardens and walking paths beyond the walkways to the units (65%). Half have playing fields, woods, and orchards. One third of the cohousing communities house chickens in a commonly-owned coop; the same

percentage of communities have a common hot tub and/or sauna. One quarter have a pond on their property. Most cohousing communities practice some forms of food-related ecological measures. Table 4 lists a few of these and the percentage of communities that engage in them.

Table 4. Participation of Communities in Sustainable Food-related Practices

Sustainable food-related practice	Percentage of communities engaged in it
community vegetable garden	92
members join local off-site CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) or buy from local farmers	87
community orchard (fruit and/or berry)	73
chicken raising for egg production on site	41
formalized bulk food buying	33
collection and use of rainwater for food production	30
other farm animals, including goats, bees, pigs, sheep, and horses.	16

Site locations are generally in line with “smart growth” concepts. For example, over seventy percent of the communities are convenient to public transportation, within walking or biking distance of a grocery store, public school, library, café or restaurant. Almost half are within walking or biking distance of a significant number of cohouser's jobs. A majority (63%) have less than two parking spaces per unit and 66% have convenient bike storage areas, while 53% of the communities reported regular carpooling by two or more households. One-third have a program or system to share privately owned automobiles. Ten percent have a community-owned truck and a charging station for electric vehicles.

*Personal growth & civic engagement.* Beyond making it easier for them to live their values, many cohousers felt that cohousing offered them an opportunity for personal growth. They mentioned the group trainings in better communication, learning to cooperate, and especially learning how to work and get along with others when one does not agree initially. Some wrote about the community's growth, the chance to help their community become the kind of place where they want to live, of developing a resilient community, and of making a difference in society and working together with others for a larger purpose.

Cohousing residents are active in their surrounding communities. Almost forty percent have one or more residents who hold local public office. Nearly ninety percent report that their voting percentage in elections exceeds that in the surrounding town or city.

For all their benefits, almost half of the cohousing communities reported some initial resistance to developing cohousing in their location, and 46% required a change of zoning to build on their property. However, once built, the early resistance

dissolved. Now no communities report bad relations with their neighbors, while 58% characterize their relationship with neighbors as “mostly good” and 23% report “excellent” relationships.

### *Challenges*

Although its benefits are undeniable, cohousing is not all fun and good feelings: There are challenges. While cohousers were not nearly as prolific in citing the challenges of cohousing as they were in counting its blessings, many challenges were mentioned.

#### *Work*

One cohouser complained that “we work more together than have fun together.” Cohousing involves a lot of work which includes landscape and exterior building maintenance, simple repairs and upkeep, snow removal, cleaning and maintenance of the common house, planning and conducting common activities and events, preparing and cleaning up from common meals, bookkeeping, serving on committees and boards, etc. Most communities do most of their work themselves rather than contracting out because they feel that common work helps bind a community and also saves money. Nonetheless, getting work done and getting it done in a way that feels fair to everybody is the biggest challenge that cohousers cited. The problem was stated in many ways: fulfilling work obligations; work motivation; teams taking the leadership necessary to getting projects done; completing what was started; managing the workload; meals preparation. Closely related is the lack of trust by some that things will get done; the lack of trust that people are participating and contributing as much as they can; following through with consequences and support when people are having trouble participating enough; and accepting different levels of involvement and participation.

There are many ways that cohousing communities organize the work that needs to be done. Sixty percent of the communities report specified agreement on work expectations including the number of work hours expected each month, but these communities do not “enforce” their expectations. Twenty percent have expectations but no agreement on number of hours for work. The remaining twenty percent record hours worked and half of these have some means of enforcement, i.e. penalties for those not performing the allotted share of the work. A substantial number (31%) of the communities have a system that allows members to “buy out,” rather than perform work hours expected. These fees generally range from \$10 to \$20 per hour. The number of hours of work expected for the community range from zero to nine per month. One quarter of the communities report zero hours because there is no agreement on work expectations; another quarter expect four hours per month, and another quarter six to nine hours per month. The remainder range in between these figures.

Most cohousing communities also have “work days,” usually on weekends, for major efforts such as cleaning up the community after the winter, preparing for spring or summer planting, substantial building, or a landscaping project. Slightly less than half (41%) of the communities have four workdays per year; 36% have workdays each month; the remainder vary between these two norms and, in, some cases, only two or three workdays per year. Most communities expect participation in workdays but keep no records and have no means for enforcement.

Estimates of overall participation in the community work responsibilities vary considerably. The largest percentage (32%) of the communities estimate that participation varies from 51% to 76%, while 23% estimate participation in the range of 77% to 90%, and 22% believe that over 90% of their residents participate in community work.

In addition to the high positive correlations between sharing meals and participating in the ongoing work of the community mentioned earlier, there were high correlations with the extent to which a community enforces its work requirements. Greater enforcement of work requirements was positively related to policies that allowed residents to buy out of work and to the number of work days that a community scheduled. Considering these relationships as a group, they suggest that communities with a greater the number of common activities, and communities with stated work requirements function more effectively.

Sometimes communities hire outsiders to do some of the work. The most common contracted-out services are: snowplowing (reported by 46% of the communities), cleaning (34%), bookkeeping (23%) and lawn/landscaping (23%). Other contracted services mentioned included: trash removal, auditing, tree removal, and skilled labor.

#### *Consensus and making decisions.*

Four-fifths of the cohousing communities use the consensus model for decision-making. The remaining one-fifth primarily uses a modified form of consensus, such as a fallback to a super-majority vote or sociocracy. No community uses a simple majority vote for decisions. This proved to be both a benefit and a challenge for cohousers. The survey respondents reported occasional breakdowns in the consensus process such that those with lobbying skills get what they want more often, while the less skilled are less successful. Some question the effectiveness of consensus decision-making, some lack the patience for it, and some find its pace too slow. Time management and using the community's collective time wisely to meet needs of communication, consensus, and action appears to be difficult. In short, as one respondent said, "it's a challenge to govern ourselves wisely and efficiently."

Failure to confront issues and differences within the community leads to resentment, isolation, and non-communication even in the midst of "closeness." For example, some felt challenged by the unequal participation in upkeep or other community obligations, and the perception of unequal participation. Differences in standards of upkeep, cleanliness, and organization tend to affect those with "higher" standards more negatively and create resentments.

Cohousers see a challenge in preconceived ideas, in different opinions and in lack of time to really discuss issues and work things out. Some felt challenged in dealing with bullying and obstructionism, and in the way cohousers behave toward one another when conflict arises. Others wrote of challenges in communication, in resolving interpersonal conflicts, in hearing all points of view, in balancing the needs of people who like structure and those who don't, in old resentments that are not based on present situations, in managing a diversity of opinions, in getting along, and incorporating new members well.

Even while some cohousers enjoyed a sense of living with like-minded neighbors others felt their communities were challenged by a lack of clearly defined, mutually agreed-upon values which we articulate and commit to on a regular basis. For instance, some people feel that expressing anger is healthy and valuable while others feel that courtesy is more important and that direct expression of anger can be destructive. It is challenging to manage a diversity of opinions, to keep it non-personal and encourage everyone to be honest and express their feelings.

Probably related to problems with work and communication, some cohousers worried about the low attendance at community meetings, disengaged members, a dip in morale, fatigue, and people losing interest in dedicating time to community

building as other priorities take precedence.

Other challenges were mentioned only once: pets; an aging infrastructure giving rise to on-going repair expenses (primarily caused by dry rot); rebuilding the community after a construction defect gave rise to a high number of turnovers and renters; worry about how aging will complicate involvement when there will be less energy and physical difficulties as members age; and using the common house more from day to day.

### *Economic Questions*

Because home owner associations are responsible for the exteriors buildings as well as common property, they are required to set aside funds for replacement reserves, such as to replace roofs, repaint building exteriors, make major repairs to common house, etc. The survey inquired about the percentage of the monthly association fee set aside for this purpose. The results revealed a broad range from as low as 10% to over 50%. The most common replacement reserve percentages were: 31% of the communities set aside 20% or less, 33% of the communities set aside 20% to 40%, and 21% of the communities set aside 40% to 50%.

Association fees are used for an annual operating budget and general maintenance of common land and buildings. A number of communities pay for individual unit water and heating through the monthly association fee. Nearly one-quarter of the communities have common internet, while 4% of the communities offer cable TV through the common fee.

In response to the current recession, cohousing communities were asked how many units were behind in payment of monthly fees and how many units were in foreclosure. Two-thirds reported no units behind in monthly fee payments and most of the others reported only one unit. Only 13% of the communities reported a unit in foreclosure and all but two of those reported only one unit. These low figures, compared to the national trends, indicate the exceptional financial stability of cohousing communities.

Two-thirds of the communities reporting units behind in payments or facing foreclosure, had made some effort to assist their neighbors, further pointing to the quality of caring found in cohousing communities for members in crisis. Respondents were asked about how the decline in the national housing market has affected the sale prices of cohousing units in their community over the past three years. The results were that 14% estimated that their sale prices had risen, 24% said that they had remained about the same, 41% indicated that they had fallen, and 4% were not sure.

Nearly ninety percent of the respondents estimated that their cohousing property is valued higher (43%) or about the same (46%) as local real estate. Only 5% estimated lower values.

Because Cohousing communities must buy their land and build at market rates but value diversity, affordability is an issue of considerable interest and concern. Many lower and moderate-income families and individuals simply cannot afford to purchase a cohousing unit. For this reason the Cohousing Association created an Affordable Cohousing Task Group in 2010 to explore this issue. This survey indicates that many communities tried to make some units affordable. Thirty percent of the communities with affordable housing obtained it from private sources (primarily the cohousing community itself), twenty-two

percent from public subsidies, and twelve percent from foundations or charities.

The number of units made affordable is often not large, but it does increase access and help make cohousing more diverse than it otherwise would be. The Cohousing Association has started working with various national and governmental organizations to explore ways to increase the affordability of cohousing.

Cohousing communities are open to various types of non-resident members. Most communities include members who do not reside there. Table 5 shows the percentages of community members categorized by the reason they are living outside the community.

Table 5. Categories of Community Members Who are Non-residents

Affiliation Categories	Percentages <sup>1</sup>
Previous residents who wish to remain connected to the community	63
Associate members with work or monetary expectations	24
Associate members or “friends” without work or monetary expectations	34
Owners living elsewhere and renting their unit until it can be sold	53

<sup>1</sup>Communities may appear in more than one category. The total number of communities represented in the table is 51.

Unit turnover has varied considerably, from zero to a majority of units, and is often related to years of existence. The average cohousing community is ten years old and the range of units sold to new owners during this time varies from five to eight units across communities

#### *Cohousing Communities and the National Organization, COHO/US*

One third of the communities in our survey contribute regularly to the Cohousing Association of the US and a majority has had members who have attended the annual national cohousing conference. Only 13% of the communities have never had a member attend.

#### *Role of COHO/US vis-a-vis its Member Communities*

The final question in the survey was open-ended and it asked: *In what ways might COHO/US be of assistance to your community?* The responses were:

1. The website directory is already very helpful.
2. If there could be a better way of organizing how communities deal with various issues, without having to wade through hundreds of emails in the cohousing-L and extract the jewels here & there. ( i.e. what has worked and what hasn't.)

3. Facilitation training (we can never have enough)
4. Send us free training in communication skills, or any other valuable coho skill
5. Make best-practices manuals that include how to be established as a condo but still be able to recruit, educate and support potential buyers
6. How to add diversity when housing is market rate
7. How to set up incentives for young families to join.
8. Make available a concise summary of cohoUS resources and services
9. collect and post the prolific research that is done on our communities – we are frequently solicited by researchers. What happens to this data after it is collected?

Research Committee: Diane Margolis, chair, David Entin, Lisa Poley, and Laura Fitch (all are board members and residents of cohousing communities)

Volunteers: (data analysis) Chuck Maclane (data collection) Richard Kohlhaas, Elizabeth Markle, Joani Blank, Fran Hart, Jade Agular, Jennifer Daniels, Lee Davis, Marty Maskall, Rebecca Disbrow, Suzanne Uchida, Stephani Danes, Susan Green