

Social Capital and Our Community



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Center for Community Vitality



What is social capital?

"It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know." This common saying describes some of what is known about *social capital*. The saying implies what we commonly observe – that getting membership to exclusive clubs requires inside contacts; that close competitions for jobs and contracts are often won by those with friends in high places.

But “who you know” makes a difference in other ways, too. When you fall on hard times, it is friends and family who create a safety net. Your happiest and most rewarding hours may be spent talking with neighbors, sharing meals with friends, being at religious gatherings, or volunteering for community projects. (Woolcock & Narayan 2000) That’s what social capital is all about.

A simple way to start to think about social capital is to consider the networks of people in your life and ask yourself: ***Who do I know? What am I willing to do for them? What are others willing to do for me?***

The ability to create and use networks is important for personal success – on the job, in professional organizations, and in volunteer work. Communities also can create and use networks to improve the quality of life in their town. Networks help us get information, ideas, influence, and resources so that we can accomplish goals.

Social capital is made of three types of networks. Each makes a difference. There are:

- **bonding** networks
- **bridging** network
- **linking** networks

When you and your community improve your social capital, you can make change happen. You can leverage your strong networks for better results, and you can address your weak networks to make a difference in the future.

Social capital refers to the **collective value of networks** and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. (Putnam)

How does social capital help?

Communities that are rich in social capital are known to confront poverty, resolve disputes, and take advantage of new opportunities. (Woolcock & Narayan)

The basic idea of social capital is that your family, friends, associates – even acquaintances – are an important asset. You can tap that asset to survive a crisis, improve your financial footing, or just enjoy life more. This is true for individuals and for groups. Communities that have a rich and diverse stock of social networks and civic associations are less vulnerable, and can more easily tackle problems.

When social capital is lacking, it shows. We all know what it is like to be left out of the loop on important decisions, or to not be able to get a job in a field or organization where we don’t know anybody. One reason that people stay in poverty is that they don’t have the social networks and institutions that could be used to get a good job or decent housing (Woolcock & Narayan).

Social capital is so valuable that it affects almost every aspect of personal and community life. One report from Harvard University (Saguaro Seminar) summarized the benefits – stronger communities, better education, economic prosperity for peoples and communities, individual well-being and public health.

Social capital creates better communities.

Places with higher levels of social capital benefit from better quality of life. A Harvard University report described the benefits found through research.

Benefit	Signs of Strong Social Capital
Stronger Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People spend more time in community organizations. • There are more volunteers. • Citizens are more likely to vote. • People spend more time socializing with family, friends and neighbors.
Better Child Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infant mortality is lower. • There are fewer low-birth weight babies. • There are fewer teen births. • Kids drop out of school less often. • There is less violence.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students perform better on a wide variety educational measures. • Individual schools consistently outperform their peers.
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are lower rates of murder, and fewer violent crimes.
Economic Prosperity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social connections help people find jobs. • Tight-knit ethnic communities often create economic benefits for their members, most notably seed capital for business start-ups from rotating credit associations. • Cooperation and communication help business leaders to take on community leadership roles. • When employees from different firms in the same industry interact, they innovate and adapt to changing market conditions.
Public Health and Individual Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who are socially connected are happier and healthier. • Connected people are more likely to be aware of the medical help they need, and they seek it out. • They are also more likely to monitor their use of health resources (for example, to keep a doctor's appointment.) • Social support is like chicken soup when you are sick! It helps you recover more quickly. • Meeting in groups reduces stress, and less stress makes us more resistant to disease.
Democracy	<p>Social capital helps create:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective governance and healthy democracy. • Vibrant associations that organize to entertain, socialize, worship or to do community projects – like building a playground. • Broader webs of associations make it more likely that all community members have access to government – not just the “well-connected”. • More community groups give more citizens the chance to lead, and to learn to organize, cooperate and create coalitions. These skills make our governments stronger.

How can communities strengthen social capital?

Communities can improve their social capital by taking a look at the connections, trust, and engagement that people in their community have. How **bonded** are people in the community? What **bridges** exist? How **linked** are they to organizations and systems?

BONDING Networks

BONDING networks are close ties that help people get by. These connections are usually with family, friends and neighbors.

BONDING networks in communities are strong when...

- **Residents with common backgrounds trust each other.** This trust happens in personal relationships that are strong and frequent. Personal experience builds strong trust.
- **Residents with common social backgrounds engage with each other.** Families, neighbors, religious groups, ethnic groups and co-workers eat together, go to movies together, play sports and attend religious services together. Common backgrounds make this interaction easy.

Strong bonds have benefits!

Connections with others who are like you give you the sense that you belong, and help you get by. Close connections (also called *strong ties*) give you someone to call in times when you

"We must cultivate the science of human relationships - the ability of all people, of all kinds, to live together and work together."

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

need personal support – if you've lost your job, have marital problems or a health concern. When neighborhoods host a fundraiser for someone who is ill, or pool money to help pay the bills for someone who is unemployed, they are showing the great benefit of strong bonds.

But, bonded networks aren't always good for a community. Gangs, cults and elitist clubs all have very strong bonds! Strong bonds can cause groups to harm people outside their group, to reject others' perspectives, or be prejudiced against outsiders.

Here are some things you can do to strengthen bonds in your life, and in your community.

- ★ Turn off the TV and computer! Spend time with others instead.
- ★ Participate in groups, clubs and community activities.
- ★ Invite your neighbors over to play games.
- ★ Join a project with others who have similar interests.
- ★ Take walks with family or friends.
- ★ Form or join a bowling league, a softball team or a choir.
- ★ Hold a neighborhood pot luck.

"Community glue (social capital) isn't something you can rush out to the local hardware store and purchase."

—Jody Horntvedt

BRIDGING Networks

BRIDGING networks are ties that are not strong, but that give people more opportunities. We have bridging networks with people who are different from us; who are members of organizations, occupations or associations that we don't usually engage.

BRIDGING networks in communities are strong when...

- **Residents with different social backgrounds basically trust each other.** In bridging networks, trust extends beyond an individual's close connections. Trust is based more on community norms than personal experience. For example, you have a bridging network when you trust families from your child's school – even if they are from a different faith or culture than yours.
- **Residents with different social backgrounds engage with each other.** In bridging networks, people from different generations, cultures, neighborhoods and religious beliefs come together for events or to solve problems. Community-wide events, and sometimes disasters, engage people from diverse ages, cultures, or neighborhoods and increase the amount of bridging in a community.

Strong bridges have benefits!

People with broad connections expand their opportunities. Broad connections (also called *weak ties*) may only be nodding acquaintances. But they also are a resource for smaller favors, like telling you about an available job or lending you \$5.

Research shows that it's the *weak ties*, not the strong ones, that are most helpful during a job search because they gather a breadth of information and a greater number of opportunities. (Granovetter 1983)

"We don't accomplish anything in this world alone...and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something."

(Sandra Day O'Connor)

Here are some things you can do to strengthen bridging networks in your life and your community.

- ★ Welcome a new neighbor to town.
- ★ Reach out to a lonely resident.
- ★ Help someone you know from a different group get into activities you are part of.
- ★ Volunteer in your area of interest.
- ★ Invite and support people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds to get involved when you are trying to solve a community problem.
- ★ Organize a community event with broad appeal, and use key people in various groups to spread the word.

"Come to our breakfast; we'll come to your fire."
—Gold Beach, Oregon volunteer fire department

LINKING Networks

LINKING networks create access to organizations and systems that help people get resources and bring about change. These connections are usually with organizations - like foundations, local and state government or banks - that have resources, both from within and outside the community.

LINKING networks in communities are strong when...

- **Residents trust leaders of public and private institutions.** They believe that these leaders will listen to their needs and interests, and will follow through in their commitments.
- **Residents are engaged with leaders of public and private institutions.** There is interaction between people that have different levels of status and power. Linking networks develop, for example, when a teenager makes the case for a program to their city council or immigrant residents can call upon the community's business or religious leaders.

Strong links have benefits!

Connections to organizations and systems get people access to resources that create change. For example, if a junior high student asks the city council to provide land for a skate park, the city council might access a grant from a foundation that promotes youth fitness. The community gets a new asset because of new links.

"Life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital."

—Robert Putnam

Here are some things you can do to strengthen linking networks in your life and how to build community.

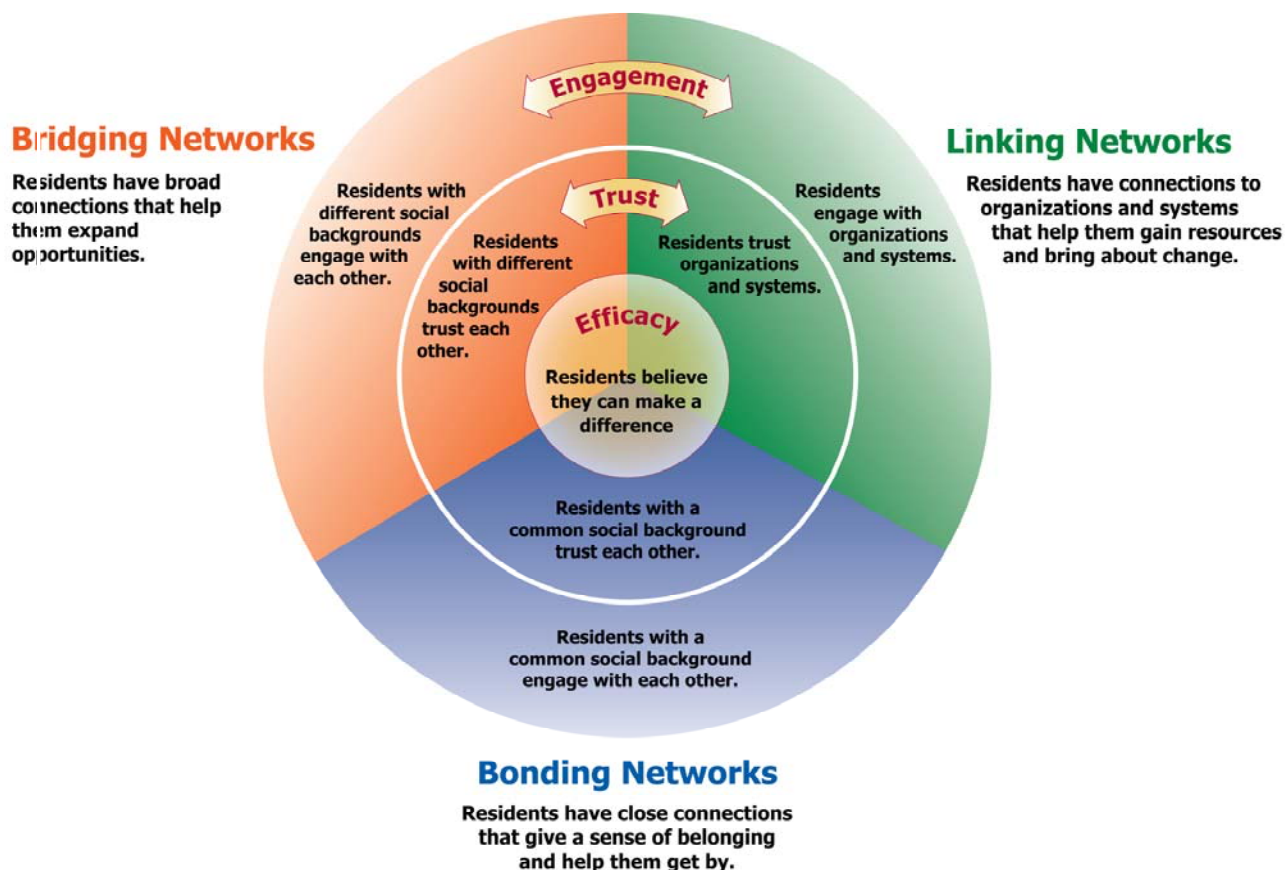
- ★ Give community leaders your input about community issues.
- ★ Create links between your outside contacts and needs and interests of other groups in your community.
- ★ Attend regional, statewide or national meetings.
- ★ Develop an idea that more than one group or community supports, and get it funded by working together.
- ★ Form a regional or statewide network that cares about issues you care about.

"In the best of all possible worlds, community members would participate to a high degree in all aspects of their community life."

—Gary Wehlage

The Whole Picture of Social Capital

Extension's Community Social Capital Model shows the whole social capital picture. At the core of the model is efficacy—a belief that one can make a difference in a variety of social contexts. The inner ring of the model considers trust within each of the three types of networks: bonding, bridging, and linking. The outer ring considers types of engagement, also within each of the three types of networks. When conditions in each of these seven aspects of social capital are strong, a community is more able to channel its human energy to solve problems.



Community Social Capital Model

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