

WASHINGTON APA'S GAME CHANGING INITIATIVE
BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL WORKING GROUP

Learn More: Build Social Capital

BiG
Ideas

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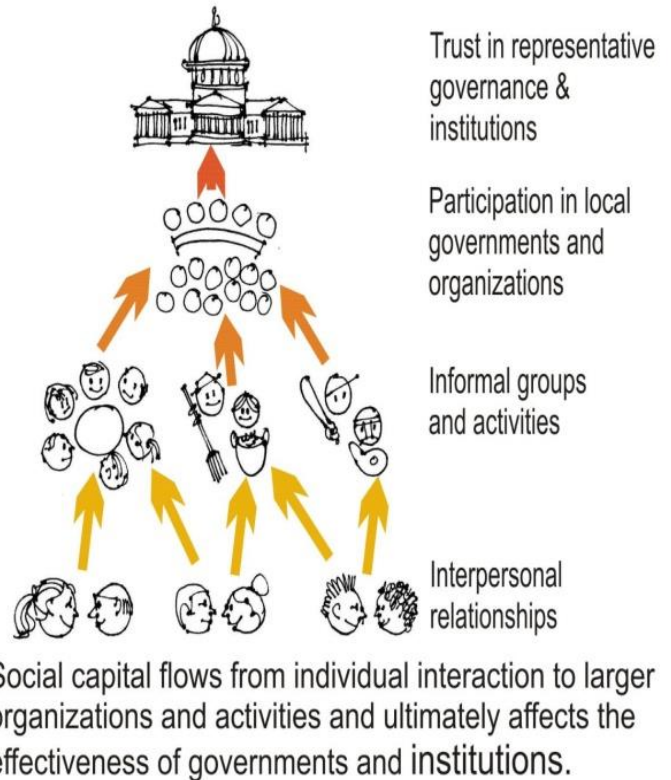
The Challenge: Building Social Capital through Community Planning Activities

In his book, *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam argues convincingly that effective democratic governance depends on “social capital” - the connections among individuals and the social networks and the reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

Peoples’ engagement as individuals and in small groups, organizations and activities as well as other forms of social interaction translate into participation in local government and ultimately into trust in larger governmental and institutional organizations. Putnam notes that indices of social capital have fallen dramatically since the 1950s, and the recent polarization of American politics certainly adds credence to his ideas. If Putnam and others are right, and if we are to work toward more effective governance, we need to increase the nation’s level of social capital, which has fallen dramatically since mid-20th century.

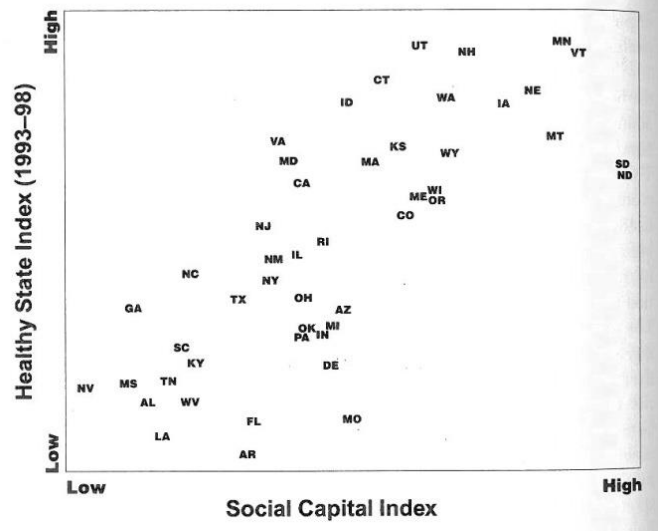
Because social capital is largely generated at the individual, local and community levels, (even in these days of social media), planners working at the community, municipal and regional levels can play a big role in fostering the social capital that will facilitate more effective and inclusive governance.

Putnam goes on to identify metrics for social capital and note that on a state by state basis, those states with higher social capital indices also tend to have healthier, higher educated populations that enjoy greater economic prosperity, more democratic governance and children’s welfare.



See *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam

Public health is better in high-social-capital states



Importance for Building Equitable Communities

As facilitators of inclusive public decision-making processes, it is planners' job to ensure that all have an equal opportunity for meaningful input. However, it is often difficult to engage certain populations and constituencies for a number of reasons.

The challenge is to increase opportunities for access and leadership for all people. The opportunity is to build greater social capital among all people and thus increase trust in and support for governance and institutions at all levels. As inequity increases within US society and government becomes more divisive, this interconnected challenge-opportunity becomes more critical.

Importance for Economic development

The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston conducted a Study in 2009 to identify the keys to success for economically “resurgent” communities. The study found that consistent and long-term collaboration among leaders, institutions and groups was the key factor helping some towns to thrive while others declined. That is, unified collective effort was more important than geographic and demographic advantages, tourism resources, and high-tech activities.

In the book Happy City written by Charles Montgomery, a Canadian writer and urban experimentalist, he argues that the designs in the built environment, including the infrastructures of architecture, transportation, and public space, have the ability to bestow a positive or negative effect on how people in the community engage socially. For an easy example, a well-designed plaza park might encourage more social interactions than a gridded parking lot. Seeing the effect of urban planning on civic engagement, Montgomery argues that “the most powerful ingredient for happiness is having a strong and positive social connection.” (Montgomery, 2013) Therefore, the design of the built environment becomes a key factor in improving social capital and fostering trust and happiness at the community level.

Social Capital Project Purpose

This project is aimed at:

- Developing a working definition of social capital in the planning context, and
- Exploring ways community planning activities can increase social capital, especially the inclusion of populations and groups with less access to the decision making process.

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Students at the University of Washington in the Community Environment and Planning program assisted Futurewise in their recent “Happy Seattle Urban Design Lab” and conducted an independent follow-up activity.

The work included:

1. Conducting a literature research regarding social capital.
2. Developing a conceptual framework (or hypothesis) for the use of planning, experimentation, and public engagement activities that may build social capital.
3. Meeting with Futurewise project lead to determine and conduct preliminary activities in support of the Oct.23, 2014 Happy City Urban Design Lab and participating in this event.
4. Conducting an independent follow-up activity building on Happy Seattle event.

The independent activity consisted of conducting a follow-up survey and research to test the correlations between life satisfaction, commute time, transportation mode, and community involvement. Students collected over 100 surveys at six locations throughout Seattle and conducted a statistical analysis to evaluate the results. Their results and findings are detailed in the Social Capital report.

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