

RESEARCH

FACTS and FINDINGS

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Social Capital and the Well-Being of Youth April 2003

The term "social capital" suggests an analogy between the financial "investments" made by individuals and corporations and the "investments" people make in social relationships. Those relationships are like financial capital when they enable people to obtain things they value, such as information, emotional support, material assistance, access to job opportunities, and wider social contacts. Social capital is closely related to two other metaphorical terms. One is "human capital," which is defined as the store of abilities a person has that enable her or him to accomplish goals, especially to earn a living. Education is a major form of human capital; in general, people who "invest" in gaining more education earn more than those with less education. The second term is "social network." A social network is simply the set of people a person knows and communicates with. The nature of the social network and the resources of the people in it determine a person's level of social capital. Someone who can easily get a loan or a recommendation for a new job from a friend or help from a neighbor has more social capital than someone who cannot. Social capital can help a person accumulate human capital (Coleman, 1994). It is useful to consider social capital from four perspectives: *Family, Neighborhood, School, and Community.*

Family Social Capital The bonds between parents and children and between parents and others in the larger community are profoundly im-



portant in shaping a young person's developmental trajectory. Parents directly affect their children's social development through a number of direct and indirect channels. The package of social skills and resources parents bring to bear most directly on their children are those that occur day-to-day inside the home: affection, age-appropriate intellectual stimulation, home safety and cleanliness, high levels of parent-child interaction, positive communication and parental monitoring of child activity are all beneficial for children and adolescents (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Parental involvement in work and social networks outside the home exert an indirect influence on children. Parental satisfaction at work, involvement in informal social networks, and involvement in religious and/or civic activities

in the larger community all influence the quality of parent-child relationships at home (Furstenberg & Huhers, 1995; Parcel & Dufur, 2001).

Neighborhood Social Capital New research demonstrates that where young people live matters. Most people would expect this. It is one reason parents are willing to pay more for a house in a "good" neighborhood. But the way neighborhoods influence youth is complex. For example, there is good evidence that neighborhoods most strongly foster youth well-being when strong intergenerational relationships occur in them, when residents regularly exchange information and resources, when they have mutual trust, feel attached to each other, and support each other, and when they are willing to take action to maintain the neighborhood (e.g., calling the police or intervening directly to stop destructive behavior). Some neighborhoods are more likely to provide this type of support than others. For example, neighborhoods in which residents live for a long time, and where many families are middle class, more readily create the kinds of supportive environments youth need. By contrast, in neighborhoods with many disadvantaged families, neighbors have a harder time sharing expectations for youth and taking collective action on their behalf. Even more discouraging, in neighborhoods where many families are disadvantaged, high residential stability can have decidedly *negative* implications for youth well-being because young people may become entrapped in dysfunctional neighborhood relationships (such as gang violence). Another unwelcome finding is that neighborhood social networks tend to be predominantly of one race even in stable, affluent neighborhoods. On the more hopeful side, even youth who live near, but not in, cohesive, well-functioning neighborhoods gain an advantage from that proximity (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, Morenho, & Earls, 1999).

School Social Capital Very little is known about how social capital in school settings affects youth well-being. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that when youth feel connected to school, attached to adults and peers, engaged in positive school-based activities, and safe at

school, they are far more likely to prosper than when any of these is missing. Indeed, feeling connected to school is a more important factor in youth well-being than school type, dropout rate, attendance rate, perceived student prejudice, classroom size, teacher training, proportion of college-bound students, or percent of parents involved in parent-teacher organization. What seems to matter most for adolescent health and well-being is that schools foster an atmosphere in which students feel fairly treated, close to others, and part of the school – all core dimensions of social capital in school settings (Blum & Rinehart, 2001).



Community Social Capital There is a growing consensus that a young person's (and adult's) interactions with the individuals and institutions outside family and residential neighborhood networks contribute strongly to youth well-being. Robert Putnam, the leading scholar of social capital, persuasively argues that the increased depression, suicide, and violence noted in more recent generations of youth compared to previous generations in the twentieth century are strongly related to decreasing levels of social connectedness between community members and civic institutions. Indeed, social connectedness is a much stronger predictor of perceived quality of life in a community than educational or economic indicators – at least for adults. Interestingly, it also appears that young people are more likely to achieve better health and educational outcomes if the *adults* in their community trust

and socialize with each other, are civically engaged, attend a faith-based institution regularly, have diverse friendships and are politically involved (Putnam, 2000).

As young people approach adolescence they are increasingly affected directly by social affiliations and support systems outside of their families, with peers, non-familial adults, and other social institutions. Experiences in their schools, communities, and among peers become increasingly important to their well-being as they get older. Indeed, there is strong evidence that positive and meaningful adolescent engagement in and connection to their schools and communities leads not only to many attributes of social capital in adulthood, it enhances young people's physical and psychological well-being overall. Unfortunately, there is also evidence that significant numbers of young people do not feel meaningfully connected to their schools and communities as they begin to negotiate more direct relationships with the social spaces outside their homes and families (Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999).

Implications Social capital is a useful concept for addressing how youth well-being is affected by the character of the various social settings in which they grow up. It is also very useful in understanding the experiences that inform young people's sense of connection to places and people and the ways in which they come to be adults who have a sense of responsibility and reciprocity in the various social settings they occupy. Research on social capital indicates that communities can promote youth development through the following actions.

- Support the development of positive parenting skills, both through instructional and mutual support programs and by promoting parents' engagement in activities that build their social capital.
- Build neighborhood networks of communication, trust, and assistance.
- Increase social capital of the *adults* in neighborhoods, schools, and communities.
- Enhance young people's connection to, trust in, and investment in schools and communities

by creating leadership and other growth opportunities for them.

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