



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL COHESION

Measuring Dimensions of Social
Capital to Inform Policy

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

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Social Capital to Inform Policy

Panel on Measuring Social and Civic Engagement and
Social Cohesion in Surveys

Kenneth Prewitt, Christopher D. Mackie, and Hermann Habermann,
Editors

Committee on National Statistics

Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES PRESS
Washington, D.C.
www.nap.edu

THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES PRESS 500 Fifth Street, NW Washington, DC 20001

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This study was supported by an unnumbered award from the Corporation for National and Community Service through the National Science Foundation. Support for the Committee on National Statistics is provided by a consortium of federal agencies through a grant from the National Science Foundation (award number SES-1024012). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizations or agencies that provided support for the project.

International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-309-30725-3

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-309-30725-2

Additional copies of this report are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Keck 360, Washington, DC 20001; (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313; <http://www.nap.edu>.

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Printed in the United States of America

Suggested citation: National Research Council. (2014). *Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion: Measuring Dimensions of Social Capital to Inform Policy*. K. Prewitt, C.D. Mackie, and H. Habermann (Eds.), Panel on Measuring Social and Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion in Surveys. Committee on National Statistics. Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

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PANEL ON MEASURING SOCIAL AND CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL COHESION IN SURVEYS

KENNETH PREWITT (*Chair*), School of International and Public
Affairs, Columbia University

MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI, Annenberg School for Communication,
University of Pennsylvania

ROBERT W. EDWARDS, Independent Consultant, Canberra ACT,
Australia

MORRIS P. FIORINA, JR., Hoover Institution, Stanford University

JEREMY FREESE, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University

CHARLOTTE B. KAHN, The Boston Foundation, Boston, MA

JAMES M. LEPKOWSKI, Institute for Social Research, University of
Michigan

MARK HUGO LOPEZ, Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC

NORMAN H. NIE, Independent Consultant, Los Altos Hills, CA

PAMELA M. PAXTON, Department of Sociology, University of Texas at
Austin

STANLEY PRESSER, Sociology Department, University of Maryland

JOEL SOBEL, Economics Department, University of California,
San Diego

SIDNEY VERBA, Department of Government, Harvard University

CHRISTOPHER D. MACKIE, *Study Director*

HERMANN HABERMANN, *Senior Program Officer*

MICHAEL J. SIRI, *Program Associate*

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HAL STERN, Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences, University of California, Irvine

CONSTANCE F. CITRO, *Director*

JACQUELINE R. SOVDE, *Program Associate*

Acknowledgments

This report is the product of contributions from many colleagues, whom we thank for their insights and effort. The project was sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service; additional input toward its initiation and development was contributed by the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Early on during the panel's work, Nathan Dietz and Christopher Spera (Corporation for National and Community Service), John Bridgeland and David Smith (NCoC), and Brian Harris-Kojetin (U.S. Office of Management and Budget) provided the panel with guidance regarding goals for the study. They also presented crucial background information about the status of the Serve America Act of 2009 (which calls for the Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics to "collect annually, to the extent practicable, data to inform the Civic Health Assessment"), about publications such as *America's Civic Health Index* and related state and city projects led by NCoC and The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and about the Current Population Survey (CPS) Civic Engagement Supplement.

This report has been reviewed in draft form by individuals chosen for their diverse perspectives and technical expertise in accordance with procedures approved by the Report Review Committee of the National Research Council (NRC). The purpose of this independent review is to provide candid and critical comments that assist the institution in making its reports as sound as possible and to ensure that the reports meet institutional standards for objectivity, evidence, and responsiveness to the study

charge. The review comments and draft manuscript remain confidential to protect the integrity of the deliberative process. The panel thanks the following individuals for their review of this report: William P. Eveland, Jr., Department of Communication, Ohio State University; Nancy Folbre, Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Lewis A. Friedland, Center for Communication and Democracy, University of Wisconsin–Madison; D. Sunshine Hillygus, Duke Initiative on Survey Methodology, Duke University; Michael Hout, Department of Sociology, New York University; Cheryl Maurana, Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Program, Medical College of Wisconsin; Jack Needleman, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles; Robert J. Sampson, Department of Sociology, Harvard University; Nora Cate Schaeffer, Department of Sociology, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Matthew Smith, Division of Integrations, Lingotek, and Brigham Young University–Idaho; Eric (Ric) Uslaner, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland; and Burton A. Weisbrod, Department of Economics, Northwestern University.

Although the reviewers listed above provided many constructive comments and suggestions that resulted in a greatly improved report, they were not asked to endorse the conclusions or recommendations, nor did they see the final draft of the report before its release. The review of the report was overseen by Jennifer L. Hochschild, Department of Government, Harvard University; and John C. Bailar III (professor emeritus), University of Chicago. Appointed by the NRC's Report Review Committee, they were responsible for making certain that the independent examination of this report was carried out in accordance with institutional procedures and that all review comments were carefully considered. Responsibility for the final content of the report rests entirely with the authoring panel and the NRC.

The panel would also like to thank the following individuals who attended meetings and generously presented material to inform panel deliberations: Robert Putnam, Harvard University, one of the leading and most influential research pioneers on the topics covered in this report, provided an overview of the importance of, challenges facing, and opportunities in the measurement of civic engagement and social cohesion; Peter Levine, Tufts University, informed the panel about the innovative work by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Marco Mira d'Ercole, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, reported about ongoing data projects in Europe and discussed implications of the Stiglitz/Sen/Fitoussi Commission recommendations on measuring social connections and political engagement.

Robert Groves, U.S. Census Bureau; Jim Lynch, Bureau of Justice Statistics; Thomas Nardone, Bureau of Labor Statistics; and Sunil Iyengar,

National Endowment for the Arts; presented to the panel from the perspective of U.S. statistical agencies. Each provided insights about approaches to measuring national well-being and progress and their many components, and about how government data collection in the areas of civic engagement and social cohesion could potentially inform policy.

Andrew Gelman, Columbia University, discussed small-area/community-level estimation methods and potential nonsurvey (and nongovernment) data sources; Lisa Clement, Robert Kominski, and Christopher Laskey, U.S. Census Bureau, provided a range of insights about the performance of the CPS Civic Engagement Supplement and the potential role of American Community Survey and other government data collection vehicles. David Grusky, Stanford University, presented to the panel on the topics of intergenerational mobility, including data requirements for measuring it, as well as about the relationship of social and economic mobility to social capital and civic health.

The panel could not have conducted its work efficiently without a capable staff. Constance Citro, director of the Committee on National Statistics, and Robert Hauser, executive director of the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, provided institutional leadership and substantive contributions during meetings. Kirsten Sampson Snyder, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, expertly coordinated the review process. Eugenia Grohman provided thoughtful and thorough editing. Michael Siri provided logistical support throughout the many meeting of the panel and contributed substantively to the report compiling tables and documenting information sources. Christopher Mackie and Hermann Habermann served as staff leads on the project and contributed substantively and organizationally throughout the study.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the panel members for their patience, creativity, hard work, and graciousness. Representing a number of disciplines—political science, sociology, and economics—they brought extensive collective expertise and contributed generously with their time and effort. It was a pleasure working with each of them.

Kenneth Prewitt, *Chair*
Panel on Measuring Social and Civic
Engagement and Social Cohesion in Surveys

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Summary

People's engagement in society, their associations and networks, and the characteristics of their communities profoundly affect their quality of life. The attributes commonly discussed under the rubric "social capital"—political participation; engagement in community organizations; connectedness with friends and family and neighbors; and attitudes toward and relationships with neighbors, government, and groups unlike one's own—are often associated with positive outcomes in many areas of life, including health, altruism, compliance with the law, education, employment, and child welfare. It has also been observed that civic engagement, social cohesion, and other dimensions of social capital are sometimes related to negative outcomes. Under certain circumstances these actions and processes may contribute to social tension and community fragmentation; in others to social cooperation and integration.

Recognizing the value of understanding these relationships, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) requested that the Committee on National Statistics create a panel "to identify measurement approaches that can lead to improved understanding of civic engagement, social cohesion, and social capital—and their potential role in explaining the functioning of society." The statement of task called for the panel to consider conceptual frameworks, definitions of key terms, the feasibility and specifications of relevant indicators, and the relationship between these indicators and selected social trends. It also called on the panel to weigh the relative merits of surveys, administrative records, and nongovernment and nonsurvey data sources, and to assess the appropriate role of the federal statistical system.

To fulfill its charge, the panel assessed the role of the Civic Engagement and Volunteer Supplements of the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and currently the most visible federal survey with questions about social capital. The panel also considered the broader contextual questions implied in its charge

- Which social capital variables (dimensions) are most relevant to policy, research, and general information needs—and which are measureable?
- What are the most promising approaches—survey and non-survey, government and nongovernment—for collecting this information?
- What should be the role of the federal statistical system, recognizing a rapidly changing data collection environment?
- How might disparate data sources—including administrative data and unstructured digital data (that is, the vast range of information produced on an ongoing basis, and usually for purposes other than statistics and research)—be exploited?

CONCLUSION 1: Data on people's civic engagement, their connections and networks, and their communities—aggregated at various levels of demographic and geographic granularity—are essential for research on the relationships between a range of social capital dimensions and social, health, and economic outcomes, and for understanding the directions of those effects. This research in turn informs policies that seek to maximize beneficial outcomes and minimize harmful ones.

The panel emphasized the importance of data collection and measurement of social capital dimensions on the basis of (1) evidence connecting them to specific, measurable outcomes in domains such as health, crime, education, employment, and effectiveness of governance; (2) their value in providing descriptive information capable of generating insights about society; and, relatedly, (3) their research and policy value.

KEY MEASUREMENT CONCEPTS

Though the relevant literature is extensive, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of social capital or taxonomy of its components. The first key term referenced in the study charge, "civic engagement," is, according to Ehrlich (2000, p. vi), comprised of individual activities oriented toward making "a difference in the civic life of . . . communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation

to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes." Volunteerism is one defining characteristic of civic engagement in that most if not all such activities are discretionary.

The second key term in the charge, "social cohesion," can be viewed as having multiple dimensions, including: belonging or isolation, inclusion or exclusion, participation or noninvolvement, recognition or rejection, and legitimacy or illegitimacy (Jensen, 1998). By implication, as articulated by Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2128), "a society lacking cohesion would be one which displayed social disorder and conflict, disparate moral values, extreme social inequality, low levels of social interaction between and within communities and low levels of place attachment." Specification of the geographic unit of analysis (spatial scale) is an essential dimension of social cohesion. Neighborhoods, states, or other groups can be in conflict with one another while demonstrating strong internal social cohesion. Portes (1998, p. 6) emphasizes the capacity of personal and group connections and other support resources to affect "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of their membership in social networks or other social structures."

Civic engagement and social cohesion are often viewed as components of the charge's third key term—social capital. Francis Fukuyama (2002, p. 27) describes social capital as "shared norms or values that promote social cooperation, instantiated in actual social relationships." He emphasizes the role of certain subjective states and attitudes, such as trust, which "... acts like a lubricant that makes any group or organization run more efficiently" (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 16). Putnam (2003) introduces two types of social capital: bridging and bonding. The former is exemplified by voluntary associations and horizontal ties based on common interests that transcend differences of ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status in communities; the latter refers to social ties built around homogeneous groups that do not span "diverse social cleavages."

The key terms in the study charge are constructs with uncertain boundaries.

CONCLUSION 2: Because the terms "social capital," "civic engagement," and "social cohesion" refer to broad and malleably-defined concepts that take on different meanings depending on the context, they are not amenable to direct statistical measurement. However, dimensions of these broad constructs—the behaviors, attitudes, social ties, and experiences—can be more narrowly and tangibly defined and are thus more feasibly measured.

Measures of social capital can also be differentiated in terms of those that are behaviors (e.g., participating in a political campaign), those that capture attitudes (e.g., trust in neighbors or political representatives), and those that are experiences (e.g., being discriminated against). Many of these are rooted at the individual level, though they may typically be studied as properties aggregated at group levels ranging from families, to neighborhoods, to communities, to regions, to nations. Others, such as voter identification laws or school segregation, are inherently group concepts. And the relevant unit of observation can be suggestive of the appropriate data collection mode. If one is interested in total voter turnout or total membership in associations, administrative and other nonsurvey data sources may be adequate. If the focus is attributes of individuals engaged in various behaviors or with specific attitudes, microdata are essential.

PRIORITIZING MEASURES, DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

Studies of social capital have covered a broad range of topics in the social, health, and economic policy domains, including:

- personal connectedness and employment outcomes;
- effects of social cohesion, self-reported “trust,” and other dimensions of neighborhood social capital on crime and public safety;
- cohesion and community resiliency;
- home ownership and civic engagement;
- social connections and self-reported well-being;
- isolation and health effects;
- social capital and mental illness;
- social relationships and health mechanisms; and
- social capital and child outcomes.

Depending on the question of interest, a given dimension of social capital may be seen as a mechanism whereby change can be affected (i.e., through policy levers) or as the primary focus itself. For example, reducing social isolation or improving trust in a neighborhood may be tools to improve health and reduce crime, or they may be the policy objectives in and of themselves.

CONCLUSION 3: For data collection related to social capital, the theoretical or policy issue of interest is critical for identifying clearly defined components and developing instruments (survey or otherwise) designed to measure these components.

Empirical research has produced valuable insights and advanced understanding of a range of phenomena related to social capital. However—with some exceptions, such as social isolation as a risk factor for health—to date, it has produced only sketchy evidence of causal relationships between social capital and outcomes of policy interest or, conversely, of how a given indicator is predictive of changes in the level of social capital (e.g., the link between home ownership and extent of participation in the community). Even so, data collected from large population surveys are still essential because of their value in providing descriptive information and because evidence continues to accumulate that phenomena described as social capital play an important role in the functioning of communities and the nation.

CONCLUSION 4: The study of social capital, though a comparatively young research field, is sufficiently promising to justify investment in data on the characteristics of communities and individuals in order to determine what factors affect their condition and progress (or lack thereof) along a range of dimensions. Improved measurement, additional data, and resulting research findings are likely to find uses in policy making.

Although there are difficult challenges of demonstrating causation, this (along with wrestling with vague concepts) is familiar in nearly all social science research fields, especially early in their development. Studies based on highly granular, ongoing, and multisource datasets appear to offer the greatest promise for untangling the circularity of causal pathways—for example, to what extent does deterioration of job growth in a city weaken social ties and lead to group conflict over scarce resources, and vice versa? To what extent does interaction and trust among neighbors contribute to reductions in crime, and to what extent do reductions in crime encourage greater neighborhood connectedness?

With these and other research questions in mind, statistical agency programs may prioritize (1) improvement in the near-term data collection, focusing primarily on existing survey vehicles, or (2) longer term visions that anticipate the potential of combining government surveys with one another, with administrative data, and with unstructured digital data generated as the by-product of day-to-day business, communication, social, and other activities.

RECOMMENDATION 1: For data collection in areas of social capital, a multipronged strategy should be pursued in which large population surveys conducted by the federal statistical system play a role, but one that is increasingly complemented

and supplemented by new, innovative, experimental alternatives. The greatest promise lies in specific-purpose surveys such as those focused on health, housing, and employment issues (especially those that have a longitudinal structure) and in the exploitation of nonsurvey sources ranging from administrative data (e.g., local-level incident-based crime reports) to digital communications and networking data that are amenable to community-level analyses. Many of the surveys will continue to be conducted or funded by the federal government, while many of the nonsurvey sources will originate elsewhere.

The quality of the nation's information and its research capacity will in large part be determined by the effectiveness with which these increasingly disparate data sources can be exploited and coordinated by the statistical agencies and users of their products.

THE CPS SUPPLEMENTS

That the government collects data about civic engagement signals that these topics are important to the nation. The purpose of the CPS Civic Engagement Supplement—fielded in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and, with a half sample, 2013—as stated in justification documentation prepared by CNCS for the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (2011, p. 3), is to

... collect data for the Civic Health Assessment, an annual report mandated by the Serve America Act that is produced in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC). The Civic Engagement Supplement provides information on the extent to which American communities are places where individuals are civically active. It also provides information on the number of Americans who are active in their communities, communicating with one another on issues of public concern, and interacting with public institutions and private enterprises.

At national and state levels, the Supplement fulfills several elements of this mandate for descriptive information.

CONCLUSION 5: Current Population Survey (CPS) supplements, which offer only a limited amount of survey space (about 10 minutes is allotted for a given monthly supplement), are most appropriate for collecting data on variables that (1) can be estimated from a small set of questions, (2) deal with people's behaviors, (3) would be difficult to ascertain through nonsurvey methods, and (4) need to be correlated with personal attributes that are also captured on the survey in order to study how they inter-