

Social Capital Indicators Review

Author Name(s): **Frederick Foxton (ONS) , Richard Jones (ONS)**

Abstract

This paper describes ONS's work on developing statistics on social capital in the UK.

Acknowledgements

1. This paper builds on previous work done by several authors at ONS especially Penny Babb (Babb, 2005).

Social Capital Indicators Review Paper

Context

Interest in the idea of social capital increased in the late 1990s, prompted by research showing that a higher level of social capital is associated with higher productivity of individuals and groups, better health outcomes, higher educational achievement, and lower crime rates. In response to this interest, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted its Social Capital Project with the aim of improving the collection and dissemination of statistics on social capital. No new major outputs on social capital have been produced by ONS since 2006 but the National Well-Being agenda and work of the Social Impacts taskforce has renewed interest in the concept at ONS. This paper reviews ONS's work on Social Capital and availability of the measures of social capital.

Concepts and Definitions

What is social capital?

Definitions of social capital vary, but they tend to share the core idea that social networks have value. The definition used by ONS, taken from the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups".

What are networks?

Formal and informal networks are central to the concept of social capital. They are defined as the personal relationships which are accumulated when people interact with each other in families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meeting places.

Different types of social capital can be described in terms of different types of networks:

- **Bonding social capital** – describes closer connections between people and is characterised by strong bonds e.g. among family members or among members of the same ethnic group; it is good for 'getting by' in life.
- **Bridging social capital** – describes more distant connections between people and is characterised by weaker, but more cross-cutting ties e.g. with business associates, acquaintances, friends from different ethnic groups, friends of friends, etc; it is good for 'getting ahead' in life.
- **Linking social capital** – describes connections with people in positions of power and is characterised by relations between those within a hierarchy where there are differing levels of power; it is good for accessing support from formal institutions. It is different from bonding and bridging in that it is concerned with relations between people who are not on an equal footing. An example would be a social services agency dealing with an individual e.g. job searching at the Benefits Agency.

What are shared norms, values and understandings?

These relate to shared attitudes towards behaviour that are accepted by most individuals/groups as a 'good thing': examples are not parking in a disabled parking space at a supermarket and giving up your seat to someone who needs it more on the bus. These norms of behaviour are understood by most members of society. Sanctions underpin norms: fear of disapproval might compel individuals to comply with the shared values or norms and behave in an accepted way.

What are groups?

Groups in this context are very broadly defined and can refer to:

- **Geographical groups** - such as people living in a specific neighbourhood.
- **Professional groups** - such as people in the same occupation, members of a local association or voluntary organisation.
- **Social groups** - such as families, church-based groups, groups of friends.
- **Virtual groups** - such as the networks generated over the internet in chat rooms through common interest groups.

There are several reasons why this definition was chosen. Firstly, it was produced by a well recognised organisation and respected publication, The Well Being of Nations (Cote and Healy, 2001). The definition was premised on an extensive international literature review covering both the conceptual issues and frameworks for measurement. Secondly, it is succinct and written in a language that is accessible to most people. Thirdly, although there is debate in academia about definitions of social capital, the OECD definition is sufficiently supported for it to be adopted by the UK government. Using the OECD's definition increased the chances of developing internationally comparable measures of social capital.

Dimensions of Social Capital

Five main dimensions of Social Capital formed the basis of ONS's work:

- civic participation
- social networks and support
- social participation
- reciprocity and trust
- views about the area

Definitions of these dimensions and examples of indicators are show in **Table 1**. These dimensions were selected following earlier work carried out in the UK and international studies.

Table 1: UK Social Capital Measurement Framework

Dimension	Definition	Examples of Indicators
Civic participation	Individual involvement in local and national affairs, and perceptions of ability to influence them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Perceptions of ability to influence events · How well informed about local/national affairs · Contact with public officials or political representatives · Involvement with local action groups · Propensity to vote
Social networks and social support	Contact with, and support from, family and friends. These are seen as important sources of social capital. The number and types of exchanges between people within the network, and shared identities that develop, can influence the amount of support an individual has, as well as giving access to other sources of help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Frequency of seeing/speaking to relatives/friends/neighbours · Extent of virtual networks and frequency of contact · Number of close friends/relatives who live nearby · Exchange of help · Perceived control and satisfaction with life
Social participation	Involvement in, and volunteering for, organised groups. Some indicators are measuring sources of social capital (e.g. those related to the personal contacts and interactions that are made by meeting people through clubs, churches, organisations, etc). Others are measuring outcomes of social capital. For instance, voluntary work is an important indicator of people's willingness to undertake activity that benefits others and the wider community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Number of cultural, leisure, social groups belonged to and frequency and intensity of involvement · Volunteering, frequency and intensity of involvement · Religious activity

Dimension	Definition	Examples of Indicators
Reciprocity and trust	The amount of trust individuals have in others, those they know and do not know, as well as trust in formal institutions. Trust is seen as being closely linked to social capital, either as a direct part of it or as an outcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Trust in other people who are like you · Trust in other people who are not like you · Confidence in institutions at different levels · Doing favours and vice versa · Perception of shared values
Views of the local area	Individual perceptions of the area in which they live. This dimension is included as an aid for analysis and is not considered an aspect of social capital. Positive views of the local area are a good correlate for how happy, safe and secure people are within their environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Views on physical environment · Facilities in the area · Enjoyment of living in the area · Fear of crime

Download table

XLS [XLS format](#)

(26 Kb)

Measuring Social Capital

The dimensions were used to formulate a harmonised set of questions to collect the data on core elements of social capital. In 2003, ONS published a set of questions that were recommended by the cross-governmental working group for measuring social capital in a consistent way. A pilot of the proposed questions was run on the ONS Omnibus survey in 2003. The harmonised set was included (in full) in the General Household Survey Trailer 2004/5. Selected questions were included in the Health Survey for England older focus questions 2005 and the Survey of English Housing. Questions measuring the core aspects of social capital were included in the Home Office Citizenship Survey and Families and Children Survey Wave 7 (2005).

In response to a request from the Social Impacts Taskforce of the Government Economic Service and Government Social Research, ONS has reviewed the current status of the indicators. These results of the review are included in the attached spreadsheet.

[Social Capital Indicators Spreadsheet \(253.5 Kb Excel sheet\)](#)

The International Context

There is a general desire within national statistical offices to be able to compare with other nations. Many of the problems that are encountered are not unique to social capital measurement. However, the problems of conceptualisation are magnified with social capital. The problem is compounded with the varying nature of different societies and their experience of social capital. The OECD has been co-ordinating methods for measuring social capital. The European Union's Survey of Income and Living Conditions has included indicators of social participation, such as contact with relatives and friends, and informal volunteering.

The World Bank, through its Social Capital Thematic Group, has developed the Social Capital Assessment Tool (SOCAT) and the Social Capital Integrated Questionnaire (SOCAP IQ), as measurement tools to inform operations.

Next Steps

As ONS develops its work in this area, it will seek to address several questions:

- What is the level of awareness about social capital amongst policymakers/analysts?
- What is the demand for measures of social capital?
- How to ensure departments are fully engaged with the work to measure social capital?
- How to mesh social capital measures with the more specific measures needed for policy impact assessment?
- How does Social Capital fit into the Measuring National Well-Being Agenda?

One conceptualisation of how social capital fits into the National Well-Being Work is through DEFRA's stocks and flows framework in which Social Capital is treated in as an asset in a similar to Physical, Environmental and Human Capital (Harper and Price, 2011). ONS publishes estimates of produced capital as part of the National Accounts. Since 2001, ONS has published environmental accounts and in November 2010 published its first estimates of the Human Capital Stock (Chiripanhura and Jones, 2010).

Background notes

1. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html or from the Media Relations Office email: media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Copyright

© Crown copyright 2011

You may use or re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/ or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This document is also available on our website at www.ons.gov.uk.

References

1. Babb, P. (2005), 'Measurement of social capital in the UK'

Chiripanhura, B and Jones, R. (2010), 'Measuring the UK's human capital stock' Economic & Labour Market Review, vol 4, no 11, pp 36-63, November 2010.

Cote S and Healy T (2001) 'The Well Being of Nations. The Role of human and social capital.' Organisation for economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.

Harper, G and Price, R (2011) 'A framework for understanding the social impacts of policy and their effects on wellbeing' Defra Evidence and Analysis Series Paper 3.