Measuring Social Capital in Human Services Programs

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KEY FINDINGS

- Staff in human services programs think about the contribution of relationships to program and participant outcomes, even if they do not use the term "social capital."

- There are many ways to measure social capital. Questions tend to measure whether individuals can access resources in times of need, have someone they deeply trust, or have high levels of community and civic engagement.

- While many human services programs do not measure social capital, others use technology to measure it in innovative ways.

- When and how to measure social capital depends on participant characteristics and program goals. For example, to evaluate and inform programming, agencies may want to assess the change in participants' social capital throughout the program, compare social capital between participants and nonparticipants, or evaluate the relationship between social capital and program outcomes.

- Measuring social capital can be difficult and could lead to unintended consequences.

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Background

Human services programs use a wide variety of measurement techniques to capture an individual's level of social capital, including qualitative interviews, participant surveys, and even online journaling. This brief discusses findings on the importance of measuring social capital, the purposes for doing so, and examples of how programs both inside and outside of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) measure it. Though the federal government may not be able to directly create something as organic as social capital, it can promote awareness of social capital's importance and highlight the value of measuring it.

What is social capital?

Social capital consists of connections, networks, or relationships among people and the value that arises from them and that can be accessed or mobilized to help individuals succeed in life. It produces information, emotional and financial support, and other resources. It may include peer navigators, faith-based groups, or mentoring.

Findings from Literature Scan and Key Informant Interviews

Considerations Before Programs Begin Measuring Social Capital

Measuring Social Capital Is Important

Key informants generally agreed that social capital plays an important role in self-sufficiency and is critical to achieving economic mobility and broader well-being for individuals and families. Informants indicated that measuring social capital levels among participants in human services programs is critical for several reasons. First, attempting to measure social capital signals the value we place on it. Second, measurement can help us understand the extent to which human services programs affect individuals' levels of social capital and whether changes in those levels help drive participant outcomes. Third, measurement could be used to compare similar human services programs with and without an explicit social capital component to determine whether use of social capital increases the program's effectiveness, or to understand whether certain types of social capital are more important for certain subpopulations or in certain circumstances.

> **Methodology**
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> This project included four components:
> - A brief literature scan,
> - A needs assessment conducted with five HHS leaders and their staff,
> - Interviews with ten federal staff from six offices, and
> - Semi-structured interviews with four human services programs.

Human Services Program Staff Think about Social Capital

Informants agreed that frontline staff and case managers in a wide range of human services programs do think about the value of relationships and how relationships can be mobilized to help individuals succeed, even if they do not specifically refer to this concept as social capital. However, while most frontline workers understand the value of social connections, several informants noted that these workers may not always have the resources to measure social capital or to help participants build and leverage it.

Social Capital Can Be Negative

Not all forms of social capital are beneficial. For example, an individual might have high levels of trust in certain connections that could lead to negative outcomes, such as gang involvement. Social capital can also reinforce existing networks that exclude individuals who are already isolated or marginalized. Thus, programs may want to consider this possibility when measuring social capital.

Difficulty and Unintended Consequences of Measurement Are Factors to Consider

Several key informants indicated that it might be difficult to measure something as intangible as social capital, and others flagged the importance of context and environment. For example, a program or intervention may succeed in one location where social capital levels are high, and it might be less successful in areas with lower community-level social capital. Therefore, it is important to consider environment and context during the measurement process.

Key informants also highlighted the importance of considering unintended consequences of measuring social capital. For example, one interviewee anecdotally noted that a focus on measurement and documentation could unintentionally cause case managers or frontline staff to focus more on documentation than on building meaningful relationships with participants. Thus, it is important to keep in mind potential negative consequences of measuring social capital, particularly depending on how data are collected.

Participant Characteristics Have Measurement Implications

Informants noted that it is important for human services programs to consider the population they serve when deciding when and how to assess social capital. For example, families interacting with the child welfare system or a homeless shelter often enter at a time of crisis and may have temporarily exhausted their social capital resources. However, we might expect their social capital would grow or rebound after the immediate crisis recedes. In this case, it might make sense to assess baseline levels of social capital upon intake and then over longer periods of time than for other programs, after a case management plan is established and once the immediate crisis subsides. Measuring that family's social capital over a long period of time would therefore be critical to accurately understand their level of social capital.

Accurate Measurement without Undue Burden Is Important

Key informants also emphasized that no data collection required of federal grantees should be unduly burdensome, especially since extensive data collection requirements may be time consuming and arduous for grantees. However, interviewees largely agreed that any measurement efforts should prioritize *accurately* measuring social capital, with broad consensus that adequately capturing a concept as nuanced as social capital requires asking multiple questions and perhaps even using a multi-pronged scale. Respondents wanted to ensure that any measures would collect meaningful information rather than just what is easy to capture quickly. Informants suggested that accuracy and burden should be balanced to ensure that any measurement efforts are as accurate as possible without causing undue burden.

How to Measure Social Capital

There Are Many Ways to Measure Social Capital

Key informants and the literature scan identified many different ways to measure social capital, demonstrating that there is no agreed-upon best method or any single question that captures all aspects of social capital. For example, social capital can refer to connections with people similar to us ("bonding"), with people different from us ("bridging"), or with people or institutions with power in the community ("linking"). However, these categories are not always distinct. A mentoring relationship may build bonding social capital if both people have shared experiences, such as experience with substance use disorder, but it could be considered bridging social capital if they have different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. If the mentor shares a connection to an employer, it could be linking social capital. Each program may want to measure different aspects of social capital based on its particular model.

Questions assessing social capital are wide ranging, though they typically fall into one of several general categories:

- Some questions measure **access to resources in times of need** by asking people whether they have someone to turn to for child care, a small amount of money, or some other resource in an emergency. These questions may assess aspects of bonding and linking social capital.
- Another common type of question asks whether people have **someone in their lives whom they deeply trust**, or if they trust their neighbors. These questions may measure bonding and bridging social capital.
- Other questions try to capture social capital by measuring **community and civic engagement**, such as by asking people whether they vote, if they have library cards, if they volunteer, and how many of their neighbors they know. Engagement questions may capture components of bridging and linking social capital.

How and When to Measure Social Capital Depends on Program Goals

Staff also noted that the most appropriate way for programs to measure social capital depends on the goals for measuring it. Goals might include measuring a participant's growth in social capital over the course of the program, comparing their social capital levels to those of people not in the program, evaluating whether higher levels of social capital lead to improved program outcomes, or other objectives. These different goals might all require different data collection methods, so before deciding on a method and timing of social capital measurement, programs may want to carefully consider what they want to know and why.

When to measure social capital is particularly dependent on the goals of measurement:

- **Change in social capital over time**:
  In this case, a program may want to measure social capital at baseline and after program completion. An assessment midway through the program could inform service delivery and program improvement but may not be necessary.
- **Social capital of participants compared with nonparticipants**:
  If comparison is the goal, programs may randomly assign individuals to program participation. Baseline assessments may be less relevant when individuals are randomly assigned, so programs might assess social capital upon program completion and after a follow-up period.
- **Relationship between social capital and outcomes**:
  To evaluate this relationship, programs would likely want to assess social capital at baseline, at program completion, and after a follow-up period.

How to ask about social capital also depends on program goals and activities. For example, programs with mentoring components may want to include questions that capture bridging social capital, while programs with peer support groups may focus questions on bonding social capital. Programs may also want to capture other information to inform social capital findings. For example, demographic information would be particularly important for a program interested in how social capital affects various subpopulations. They may want to capture how often or regularly participants attend program activities to measure the importance of intensity for social capital development. This additional information may be particularly important for programs assessing the relationship between social capital and participant outcomes.

Some Programs Measure Social Capital in Innovative Ways

Some human services programs intentionally measure social capital in creative ways, and several use technology to do so, including these methods:

- Qualitative interviews with program participants
- Surveys administered to program participants
- Online journaling that asks participants to monetarily quantify the amount of help they have given and received each month
- Apps to track how often participants spend time together outside of the program

Additionally, while HHS programs and other human services programs often do not use the term "social capital," proxy measures already exist in some federal programs' data collection efforts. For example, the **Runaway and Homeless Youth**

Family Independence Initiative

The Family Independence Initiative (FII) partners with and invests in families by creating an environment that leverages their existing social capital and makes poverty escapable. Via FII's online platform, UpTogether, families complete monthly online journals, in which they answer questions about how much help they gave and received that month. They select a category of assistance (e.g., childcare, transportation, information sharing, lending money) and estimate how much that help was worth based on their understanding of the prevailing rate in the community. FII uses these data to demonstrate the economic impact of social capital exchanges and highlight the resiliency of families. For example, FII families in the Boston and Cambridge area exchanged nearly $2.2 million between 2010 and 2018.

program measures permanent connections to determine whether youth have supportive adults in their lives, and the **Responsible Fatherhood Program** asks participants about their relationships, such as whether they have individuals in their lives who will listen to their problems. These questions can potentially reflect individuals' levels of social capital, even if they are not specifically intended to measure it.

However, while the programs represented in our interviews measure social capital in diverse and innovative ways, we find that many human services programs are not yet intentionally measuring social capital and may wish to consider whether such measures might help provide important information for improving program design and outcomes.

Conclusion

There are many different ways to measure social capital, so programs may want to consider program goals, participant characteristics, and potential unintended consequences when developing measurement strategies. Some programs are already measuring social capital in intentional and innovative ways, and others are collecting data that could be used as indicators of social capital. By recognizing the value of relationships and measuring social capital, programs can assess the role that social capital plays in participants' outcomes and in helping clients achieve self-sufficiency. _

Further Reading

These public-facing resources were identified through a brief literature review and key informant interviews.

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