

**The Measurement of Social Capital in the United States**

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Lisa Hudson and Chris Chapman\*

\*The authors wish to thank Robert Putnam for generously providing much of the background information used in this paper. This paper was prepared by staff at the U.S. Department of Education, and reflects their (limited) knowledge of U.S. government efforts concerning social capital; the paper should not be viewed as a comprehensive survey of all federal efforts in this area. This paper is intended to promote the exchange of ideas among researchers and policy makers; the views expressed in it do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education.

## **BACKGROUND**

As a society, the U.S. has a strong history of group-joining, giving, and community spirit, all key components of social capital.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we also have a strong history of government distrust, and a belief that the government should stay out of individuals' personal and family lives. Unlike some other OECD countries, the U.S. does not have a federal agency (ministry) devoted to "society" or to social issues in general. In part because of these historical factors, to date there has been no focused federal effort to study or measure social capital. Although the concept of social capital has been reflected in federally sponsored data collections for some time, these collections have several limitations. They tend to focus on limited components of social capital of interest to specific agencies (e.g., voting, volunteering), they often focus on groups other than the adult population, and they are often fielded on an irregular basis. As discussed below, this situation may be changing.

### **Government Interest in Social Capital**

The conceptualization of social capital that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993) attracted the attention of federal policymakers, as this work reinforced existing concerns about social disengagement. These concerns motivated, for example, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the federal initiative to establish the Corporation for National Service (now the Corporation for National and Community Service) in 1993.

Within the past two years, a convergence of events has further motivated government interest in measuring the concept of social capital more directly. First, the publication of Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* in 2000 and the subsequent development of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (discussed below) made the concept of social capital more accessible and amenable to measurement. Second, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 increased the prominence of social capital as a national research priority. In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, strengthening social capital has become one component of the government's recovery efforts. Recent policy initiatives to build community involvement, volunteerism, and public trust include the Freedom Corps, the homeland security grant program, and proposals for expanding civic education.

Federal interest in directly measuring social capital also has grown. As noted above, the federal government has sporadically collected data on this topic in the past. Current interest focuses on the development of a consistent, comprehensive measurement tool that can be used to study change in social capital and how social capital relates to other outcomes of policy interest, such as economic development, education, health, and crime.

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<sup>1</sup> Social capital is defined here as "social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from those networks" (Putnam, 2000).

## Recent Measurement Efforts

Since the 1990s, Robert Putnam has been working with Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America to address the declines in social capital (within the U.S.) that were so dramatically detailed in *Bowling Alone*.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the need to "diagnose" current levels of social capital prior to proposing remedies, the Saguaro Seminar conducted a workshop on Social Capital Measurement in October 1999. Based on the results of that workshop, and with funding from a substantial number of community foundations, the Saguaro Seminar developed a large-scale survey to assess social capital, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS). Survey questions were derived from the definition of social capital used here (see footnote 1) and from a detailed conceptualization of the dimensions underlying that definition.

Including over 100 items, the SCCBS is a 26-minute, random-digit-dialing (RDD) telephone survey. It was first administered in 2000 to both a national sample of 3,000 respondents and to representative samples in 41 communities across the U.S., comprising an additional 26,700 respondents. (Results of the survey and survey questions are available through the Roper Center.) Two follow-ups of the SCCBS with subsets of the original respondents were also conducted, in November 2001 and spring 2002. These panel surveys allowed for an analysis of item reliability and other item diagnostics. Based on the conceptual definition of social capital and the item diagnostics, 11 key dimensions of social capital were identified within 5 domains:

- Trust
  - Social trust ("thick" versus "thin" trust, radius of trust)
  - Inter-racial/ethnic trust (a form of bridging)
- Informal networks
  - Diversity of friendship networks (a form of bridging)
  - Informal socializing with family, friends, colleagues
- Formal networks
  - Civic leadership
  - Associational involvement
  - Giving and volunteering
  - Faith-based engagement
- Political involvement
  - Conventional politics (voting)
  - Protest politics (marches, boycotts, rallies, etc.)
- Equality of civic engagement across the community (constructed measure across race, income, and education levels)

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<sup>2</sup> Some researchers have argued with Putnam's thesis that social capital in America has declined (see Ravitch and Viteritti, 2001). To some extent, these arguments take issue with how Putnam measures social capital, arguing that standard measures fail to capture change in *forms* of civic involvement, specifically by excluding newer forms of involvement.

## **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INTEREST**

As mentioned above, the federal government has recently re-focused its efforts to strengthen community cohesion or “social capital” and to measure social capital directly. However, rather than develop an independent data collection instrument to measure social capital exclusively or primarily, current efforts focus on the development of a short module of questions that can be added to an existing survey effort.

To ensure that the best models available are used to measure social capital, the federal government turned to Putnam and the SCCBS. The follow-ups to the original SCCBS administration provided information on item reliability and validity, which guided efforts to create a smaller set of questions for inclusion in a federal data collection. Initially, this effort focused on construction of a supplement to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS). Using the SCCBS item diagnostics, Putnam worked with the Census Bureau to reduce the original list of over 100 SCCBS items to fewer than 20 items, trying to ensure that each of the key dimensions of social capital were assessed in the shortened instrument.

Since the social capital module has not been finalized as of this writing, the Annex to this paper includes the proposed supplement that Putnam submitted to the Census Bureau. Putnam submitted an initial draft supplement prior to a White House workshop on measuring social capital held in May 2002. After that workshop, he submitted a modified and shortened supplement. The Annex combines both versions, with items dropped from the initial supplement proposal indicated in italics. The final, abbreviated supplement (Annex items not in italics) is estimated to take 5 minutes to complete.

### **Selection of a Carrier Vehicle**

At first glance, the CPS would seem to be a promising vehicle for a social capital supplement. Begun in 1947, the CPS is a monthly survey of about 50,000 U.S. households, and is the primary source of information on the labor force characteristics of the U.S. population. The CPS uses a panel design in which households participate in 8 interviews over 16 months. It is administered via computer-assisted telephone and personal interviews (CATI and CAPI), and uses proxy interviews to collect information on the employment status of each household member age 15 or older (on average, two adults per household). In addition to information on employment, unemployment, earnings, hours of work and other labor market information, the CPS also collects demographic data, including respondents’ age, sex, race, marital status, and education attainment level. Supplementary questions are added to the base CPS in various months to gather information on specific topics of policy interest. Existing supplements focus on income and work experience, current school enrollments, displaced workers, job tenure and occupational mobility, fertility, child support, computer ownership, voting and (voter) registration, and volunteering.

There are a number of reasons why the CPS was the first choice for a social capital data collection vehicle. First, the CPS collects information from a relatively large nationally

representative sample. Second, the information is collected annually. Third, a procedure for adding supplements to the CPS already exists. Fourth, the CPS collects a wide range of corollary data useful within a social capital framework (such as education level and employment status).

However, a number of constraints led to the final decision *not* to use the CPS as a carrier vehicle. First, time constraints limit each supplement to ten minutes of questions; in the case of the social capital supplement, this supplement would have been administered with a voting supplement, limiting each supplement to only five minutes. Second, to maintain the high response rates that currently exist in the CPS, the Census Bureau will not accept questions that are judged to be politically, morally, or otherwise sensitive; this concern applies to questions about religious activities and interactions with individuals of specific racial or ethnic groups—key components of social capital within the U.S. Third, the use of proxy interviews makes some questions less suitable for this data collection vehicle. Finally, there were concerns about how well the supplement fits with the existing voting supplement and the CPS' core labor market questions.

### **Alternative Data Collections**

Several federally administered or federally sponsored data collections could be considered as a collection vehicle in lieu of the CPS. A few of these data collections already include some key components of social capital and/or key outcomes related to social capital. A brief summary of some of these alternative data collection sources follows.

At least four federally sponsored data collections other than the CPS exist that could be used to collect social capital data:

1. **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**
  - Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice
  - Nationally representative sample of approximately 160,000 individuals
  - Data can be reported annually
  - Collected through CATI and personal interviews
  - Very few proxy interviews allowed
  - Considerable background information on each respondent
  - Unclear how much flexibility there is to add new items
  
2. **Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Survey (AELL)** of the National Household Education Surveys (NHES) Program
  - Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education
  - Nationally representative sample of 11,000-12,000 adults
  - No proxy interviews
  - Has labor market and education items
  - Fielded every two years
  - Precedent exists for including items on volunteering and social networking

3. **American Community Survey (ACS)**

- Sponsored by the Census Bureau starting in 2003, pending funding from Congress
- Annual nationally representative sample of 3 million households, from samples drawn monthly
- Mail survey with CATI and CAPI follow-ups
- Uses proxy interviews
- Possibility for supplements

4. **American Time Use Survey (ATUS)**

- Like the CPS, sponsored by BLS and administered by Census Bureau
- Begins January 2003, fielded monthly to produce annual estimates
- Nationally representative sample of 3,200 households rotating out of the CPS
- CATI administration, no proxy interviews
- Will include items collected in the regular CPS, including items on labor market, education, and voting behavior; will collect data on volunteering, and with whom individuals spend their time
- Unclear how much flexibility there is to add new items

In addition, the federal government provides partial support for at least two other data collections that could include social capital questions:

5. **General Social Survey (GSS)**

- Partially sponsored by the National Science Foundation, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago
- Nationally representative sample of 1,500 adults
- No proxy interviews
- Has labor market and education items and many items related to social capital similar to those proposed for the CPS supplement
- Fielded annually until 1994, biennially since then

6. **American National Election Survey (ANES)**

- Partially sponsored by the National Science Foundation, conducted by the University of Michigan
- Nationally representative sample of 1,500-2,000 adults
- No proxy interviews
- Has labor market and education items and some items related to social capital similar to those proposed for the CPS supplement
- Fielded every two years

Data collections that receive at least partial federal support are of particular interest because federal policymakers have leverage to influence the questions asked in these collections. However, at least other two data collections also provide information on social capital in the U.S., and could possibly be used as-is or with modification as part of an international data collection effort:

## 7. **Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS)**

- Originally sponsored by consortium of community and private foundations; future sponsorship unclear
- Nationally representative sample of 3,000 adults, supplemented with local samples of 26,700 adults
- Administered in 2000, with smaller panel studies in 2001, 2002; no plans for future administration
- No proxy interviews
- Designed specifically to measure social capital, collected data on extensive array of social capital indicators

## 8. **Giving and Volunteering in the United States**

- Conducted by the Independent Sector
- Nationally representative sample of 2,500 adults
- In-person interviews, includes proxy interviews
- Has labor market and education items and some items related to social capital
- Fielded biennially

Finally, two organizations—the Roper Center and the Gallup Organization—regularly conduct surveys of adults on various topics, including those related to social capital. Both organizations use nationally representative samples of approximately 1,000 adults, but can expand these samples if necessary. Both groups also can design their surveys to use proxy interviews or respondent-only interviews.

## **MEASUREMENT ISSUES**

In the context of developing an international module measuring social capital, it is important to note the constraints faced in the development and implementation of a U.S. module on social capital. These constraints, detailed below, also will likely apply to an international module conducted within the United States.

**Survey Length/Time.** Time is the most obvious constraint. As discussed above, a CPS supplement cannot take more than 10 minutes to complete. Similar time constraints will likely exist if social capital items are added to other existing federal surveys. This time constraint severely limits the number and type of questions that can be asked.

One way to increase the number of questions that are included on a social capital supplement is to use “split ballots”—i.e., to ask one set of questions to (a randomized) group of respondents, and other sets of questions to other groups. There are precedents for using split ballots in federal data collections, but this method does increase costs and reduce item precision (by lowering effective sample sizes).

**Item Appropriateness/Sensitivity.** For most surveys that might be used by the U.S. to collect social capital data, the questions asked must be appropriate for administration over the telephone or in person. This imposes what is typically a minor restriction on

question format. More importantly, telephone and in-person administration raises the level of item sensitivity, as some questions that respondents might feel comfortable responding to on paper (or computer screen) may be more discomfoting to answer when speaking directly to another person. (For a similar reason, positive response bias also becomes a greater concern.)

Based on experience with the CPS, we expect that a few of the questions listed in the Annex could be difficult to collect through a federally sponsored data collection for sensitivity reasons. These sensitive items include the question on attendance at religious services (Item 6 in the Annex). In this case, a compromise might be to substitute a question about religious service attendance in the list of activities in item 4. The remaining sensitive questions are those that ask about race relations (items 4E and 14D-14F in the Annex). Questions about race relations were included in the proposed supplement because of their central importance within U.S. society as an indicator of “bridging” social capital. The importance and sensitivity of this measure in the U.S. indicates the need to tailor the operationalization of concepts such as “bridging social capital” to the specific community or society in question. Alternative measures of bridging social capital may have to be developed for the U.S.

**Item Development and Quality.** In general, U.S. government agencies maintain strict standards for items to be included in their surveys. New items that have not been extensively tested in other surveys usually go through a rigorous testing process. However, agencies will usually accept items that have already been shown to work properly in other surveys. Because of the prior testing of the SCCBS, many of the social capital items included in that survey can be added directly to most government sponsored surveys, saving item development time. Newly developed items may not be so easily incorporated.

In addition, not all “proven” items are automatically acceptable for inclusion. Even if an item is shown to be valid and reliable in other surveys, it may be considered unusable due to the sensitivity issue discussed above. Some agencies also shy away from opinion items. This restriction may make it difficult to measure some aspects of social capital—e.g., the norms and trust that are engendered by community-building—forcing instead a greater focus on measurable activities as a proxy for underlying attitudinal concepts.

**Sample Size.** For aggregate national estimates, a survey with a sample size of as few as 1,000 individuals would be sufficient. However, from a policy perspective, the underlying issues of equality and access embedded in social capital necessitate disaggregation among policy-relevant social groups, such as racial/ethnic groups; residents of urban, suburban, and rural communities; socio-economic groups; and adults of various ages. The greater the degree of disaggregation desired, the larger the sample must be in order to produce reliable data; oversampling of small groups also becomes an important sampling feature.

**Agency Interest.** Virtually all federal agencies are facing over-burdened respondents who are increasingly unwilling to complete surveys. As a result of this resistance, federal

agencies are reluctant to increase the number of survey instruments or survey questions they administer, without a federal mandate or indications of clear, central policy relevance. The concept of social capital, while of interest within many federal agencies, is often perceived (rightly or wrongly) as tangential to the key policy issues addressed by the agency. Nonetheless, a number of federal agencies that have expressed some degree of interest in social capital, including the Department of Justice, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Ultimately, both the initial administration of a social capital module and its continuing administration depend on this concept finding an agency “home” that views social capital as part of its nuclear family.

**Use of Proxy Interviews.** As mentioned above, one of the drawbacks of the CPS is that it uses proxy interviews to obtain information for every adult household member. For the typical factual questions included in many surveys (basic demographic information, work status, earnings, etc.) proxy interviews are usually acceptable. However, some dimensions of social capital involve typically private, subjective judgments (e.g., questions about trust, interest in politics). It is doubtful that these dimensions can be validly assessed using proxy interviews. Disallowing proxy interviews necessarily restricts the surveys that can be considered as carrier instruments.

## **SUMMARY**

Within the U.S. government, the measurement of social capital is problematic in a number of ways. First, federal analysis of social capital is limited because the U.S. has no one agency with community life/social cohesion as its mission. Interest in the various components of social capital exists within various government agencies, but it is difficult to coordinate agencies to focus on one topic. In addition, support for the measurement of social capital appears to be limited by conceptualization and measurement issues. Criticism of Putnam’s 1995 article, although well-refuted in his later book, demonstrates that analysts are often not willing to accept cursory measures of social capital as indicative of the underlying concept. The Census Bureau’s concerns over some of the items proposed for the CPS supplement also centered around issues of item validity. In short, it is as yet unclear whether social capital can be succinctly measured in a way that would satisfy the broad policy and research communities.

Ideally, a separate survey would be established that would focus on social capital. However, setting up an independent federally sponsored survey to study social capital is not realistic at the moment. This does not mean the data cannot be collected. A number of existing data collections could be used to assess social capital through an add-on module, an approach that seems politically and technically feasible.

The selection of the carrier survey raises a number of issues. The survey should have the strengths of the CPS without suffering from all of its limitations. More specifically, the survey should be more flexible in terms of item inclusion than is possible with the CPS. Although issues of political sensitivity will hold for all federally sponsored surveys, some surveys have a history of allowing at least some attitudinal questions. If attitudinal

questions are included, the survey would also have to rely on interviews with every sampled person and not allow proxy interviews. Also, the survey should allow more than 5 minutes to be dedicated to questions of social capital.

The survey should also have the strengths of the CPS. Like the CPS, the survey should be regularly administered, preferably on an annual basis. Some flexibility may be possible in terms of periodicity, but the survey should be repeated at least every few years to facilitate the study of short-term trends. The survey should also have a very large sample size. Large sample sizes help assure the precision of various estimates even for relatively small subpopulations. They also allow for flexibility in terms of using split ballots to increase the breadth of items. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the survey should have a proven track record of accuracy and reliability.

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**ANNEX**

**PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR CPS SUPPLEMENT ON SOCIAL CAPITAL**

**Developed by Robert Putnam  
May 2002**

**Note:** Items in italics were replaced or dropped from the proposed supplement based on discussions at a May 16, 2002 White House workshop on the measurement of social capital.

1. How interested are you in politics and national affairs? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, slightly interested, or not at all interested? [Suggested alternative if proxy interviews are used: How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?]
2. *How much of the time do you think you can trust the national government to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or hardly ever?*
3. *How about your state government? How much of the time do you think you can trust the state government to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or hardly ever?*
4. We'd like to know about your involvement in your community. For each activity, we'd like to know whether you did this activity at all in the past 12 months, and if you did, how many times you've done this in the past 12 months. For all of these, I want you just to give me your best guess, and don't worry that you might be off a little. Have you in the past 12 months:
  - 4A. Attended any public meeting in which there was discussion of local or school affairs?
  - 4B. Attended any club or organizational meeting?
  - 4C. Had friends over to your home?
  - 4D. Socialized with coworkers outside of work?
  - 4E. Been in the home of a friend of a different race or had them in your home?
  - 4F. *Been in the home of someone of a different religion or had them in your home?*  
Item 6F above was replaced with:
  - 4F2. Been in the home of someone who lives in a different neighborhood than you or had them in your home?
  - 4G. *Attended a political meeting or rally?*  
Item 4G above was replaced with:
  - 4G2. Met personally with someone you consider to be a community leader?
  - 4H. *Worked on a community project?*
  - 4I. *Attended a meeting of a neighborhood association, like a block association, a homeowner or tenant association, or a crime watch group?*  
Items 4H and 4I above were replaced with:
  - 4H2. Worked with other people in your neighborhood to fix or improve something?
  - 4J. *Donated blood?*
  - 4K. *Volunteered?*
5. *In the past 12 months, have you served as an officer or served on a committee of any local club or organization?*

6. Not including weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? [Every week (or more often)/Almost every week/Once or twice a month/A few times per year/Less often than that/Don't know/Refused]
7. *People and families contribute money, property or other assets for a wide variety of charitable purposes. During the past 12 months, approximately how much money did you and the other family members in your household contribute to all secular causes and all religious causes, including your local religious congregation?*
8. *Please think about the 10 or 20 households that live closest to you. About how often do you talk to or visit with these immediate neighbors—just about every day, several times a week, several times a month, several times a year, once a year or less, or never?*
9. *Now, how about friends? About how many close friends do you have these days? These are people you feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, or call on for help.*
10. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say you are very satisfied, satisfied, not very satisfied, or not satisfied at all?
11. And how would you describe your overall state of health these days? Would you say it is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?
12. How many years have you lived in your community?
13. We'd like to ask you some questions about how you view other people and institutions. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?
14. Next, we'd like to know how much you trust different groups of people. First, think about [GROUP]. Generally speaking, would you say that you can trust them a lot, some, only a little, or not at all?
  - 14A. People in your neighborhood
  - 14B. *The police in your local community*
  - 14C. *People who work where you shop*
  - 14D. *White people*
  - 14E. *African Americans or Blacks*
  - 14F. *Hispanics or Latinos*

Items 14B-14F above were replaced with:

  - 14B2. People you work with or go to school with
  - 14C2. Strangers