Measurement of Social Capital:
The Canadian Experience

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1. Introduction

In Canada, as in many other countries, there is a growing interest in the role social capital might play in determining social, economic and health outcomes. However, to date, there has been relatively little work done on measuring social capital. Although there is no clear consensus on the definition of social capital, many household surveys include questions that are often considered to be dimensions of social capital. In addition development work is underway to conduct a social capital survey in 2003, and modules specifically designed to measure dimensions of social capital are being considered for inclusion in other national surveys.

The purpose of this paper is provide an overview of existing Statistics Canada surveys that include content related to the measurement of social capital. In addition there is a description of new initiatives underway. Although the focus of this paper is around the Statistics Canada surveys, it should be noted that there is other survey work going on in Canada. Of particular note is the longitudinal survey on social capital directed by Richard Johnston at the University of British Columbia. In addition, an earlier report has documented some of the federal and non-federal surveys of social capital developed in Canada. (van Kemenade:2001)

The concept of social capital is usually understood at a group level and not at the individual level, yet the measurements of social capital typically involve individual-level based questions that are aggregated. In the literature, the term social capital generally encompasses dimensions such as trust, social participation, informal and formal networks, civic engagement and voluntary activities. Social capital typically refers to the resources or support stocks available within communities that emerge from interactions between neighbours and group members.

Social Capital has been defined in various ways. Although Canada has not adopted a specific definition of social capital, much of the discussion seems to reflect the definition set out by the OECD that states that social capital is:

"Networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups." (OECD; 2001:41)

There are different types of Social Capital: Bonding, Bridging and Linking. Bonding Social Capital refers to networks that exist within a group and between people who are similar. This would include ties that exist within a family, or between those that speak the same language, or those who are of the same ethnic group. Bridging social capital is the networks that exist between differing groups. For example, this would be the relationships that exist between two different ethnic groups. As for linking social capital, these are relationships between those who are within different societal levels that allow for access to particular resources such as power and wealth. Canada has various measures to evaluate bridging and bonding types of social capital. Linking social capital

is a more difficult concept to measure because it involves contacts or networks specific to populations of sub-groups.

It is important however, to note that not all forms of social capital are beneficial to society as a whole. There are cases of groups, such as criminal groups, that may indeed have a high level of social capital, however their actions may be destructive to society. These groups could possibly reduce the amount of trust one feels in their community and in turn limit the level of social capital of a community in which this particular group exists. There may also be situations where social capital, particularly strong bonding among members of a group, excludes outsiders and restricts personal freedoms. For example if we think of cults or extremist groups.

To summarise the existing Statistics Canada surveys that relate to social capital, we have adopted the approach developed by ONS in the paper "Social Capital Matrix of Surveys"(Ruston; 2002:14). In that paper five specific themes related to social capital were identified and items from the various surveys were mapped to one of the themes. This facilitates a comparison of content across the various surveys. As indicated by ONS, the approach is intended to be indicative and is not meant to be exhaustive. However the use of such an approach across countries would provide a useful comparative tool. The five themes identified by ONS and used here are:

1 (SP) – Social Participation, Social Engagement, and Commitment
2 (LE) – Level of Empowerment (known as Control, self-efficacy in the U.K. version)
3 (PC) – Perception of Community
4 (SN) – Social Networks, Social Support, and Social Interaction
5 (TR) – Trust, Reciprocity, and Social Cohesion

The next section lists the various Statistics Canada surveys that include dimensions of social capital. Attention is restricted to surveys done since 1995. Information is provided on the main purpose of the survey, the target population and sample size and a brief description of the main social capital dimensions covered by the survey. More detail on specific items covered by the various surveys is provided in a matrix included as Appendix A.

Section 3 of the paper identifies two initiatives currently under development that are specifically aimed at measuring various dimensions of social capital. In the final section of the paper there is a discussion of measurement issues related to the various dimensions of social capital.

2. Statistics Canada Surveys that Measure Dimensions of Social Capital

The following surveys conducted by Statistics Canada have some questions within them that measure social capital. Although the main purpose of these surveys was not to measure social capital, they provide an indication of the types of questions related to social capital that have been asked in Canada in the past.

- 1996 General Social Survey on Social and Community Support – Cycle 11
- 1998 General Social Survey on Time Use – Cycle 12
- 1999 General Social Survey on Victimisation – Cycle 13
- 2000 General Social Survey on Access to and Use of Information Communication Technology – Cycle 14
- 2002 General Social Survey on Aging and Social Support – Cycle 16
- National Population Health Survey (NPHS)
- Canadian Community Health Surveys (CCHS) – 2001 and 2002
- National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP)
- Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS)
- Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS)

1996 General Social Survey on Social and Community Support (1996)

The main objective of the survey was to collect information on the help both received and provided by Canadians (in particular for reasons of a long term health or activity limitation); to understand the dynamics between this help and a person's social network; and to identify areas where the needs are not met and understand why. This topic was also touched on in the 1985 and 1991 General Social Surveys that had health as their core content.

The survey collected data by telephone and concentrated on help given or received during temporary difficult times or out of necessity due to long-term health or physical limitations in daily activities either inside or outside the household. The target population of the General Social Survey consisted of all individuals aged 15 and over living in a private household in one of the ten provinces. The total sample size was 12,756 and this included an over-sample of approximately 2,000 seniors aged 65 and over.

The survey provides detailed information on care networks, as well as the amounts and types of care given and received. Sections included in the survey are Help Received by respondent (source, type, amount, and unmet needs) and Help Given by respondent (to whom, type, amount, and unmet needs). Also included are questions on employment and other impacts of care giving, life satisfaction and social support networks. The main theme of this survey is of social participation and involvement. The survey is somewhat unique in providing an opportunity to investigate the network of caregivers as well as issues of reciprocity.

1998 General Social Survey on Time-Use

The 1998 General Social Survey was the third cycle of this particular survey (the first two were in 1986 and 1992) to collect data on time use. It included a detailed 24-hour retrospective diary of activities done on one's own and with others, inter- and intra-generational mobility, and personal well-being. Questions were also asked about time pressures and additional questions on activities helping someone. The data enabled analysts to measure unpaid work, such as time spent looking after children or elderly

persons, volunteer work, time crunch and quality of life. Special modules were included to look at participation in sports and cultural activities. For the first time, respondents were also asked questions about satisfaction with a range of dimensions of life and satisfaction with doing various daily activities. The main theme of the survey was social participation, sense of belonging to community, and life satisfaction.

The sample size for the survey was 10,749 and the interviews were conducted by telephone. The target population for the survey was all persons 15 years of age and over residing in Canada, excluding residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories and full-time residents of institutions.

1999 General Social Survey on Victimisation

This was the third cycle of the General Social Survey (following cycles in 1988 and 1993) that collected information on the nature and extent of criminal victimisation in Canada. Special content addressed two areas of emerging interest: public perception toward alternatives to imprisonment; and spousal violence and senior abuse. Other subjects common to all three cycles include fear of crime, perceptions of crime, police and courts; crime prevention precautions. All questions within the survey fell under the themes of empowerment / control or trust and reciprocity. Fear of crime, perceived levels of safety and trust in others and institutions such as prisons and justice system were the focus.

Beginning with the 1999 General Social Survey (GSS) the sample size for the survey was increased to approximately 25,000 per year up from the usual 10,000 in previous years. The exact sample size for the 1999 survey was 25,876, with surveys being conducted by telephone. The target population of the GSS is all individuals aged 15 and over living in a private household in one of the ten provinces, excluding residents of the three northern territories.

2000 General Social Survey on Access to and Use of Information Communication Technology

The 2000 General Social Survey was the first cycle to collect detailed information on access to and use of information communication technology in Canada. Topics include general use of technology and computers, technology in the workplace, development of computer skills, frequency of Internet and E-mail use, non-users and security and information on the Internet. The sample size was 25,090 drawn from individuals 15 years and over in the ten provinces. Surveys were conducted by telephone.

Of particular interest from a social capital point of view is the measurement of contacts using the Internet. Also included were questions related to voting behaviour, local participation and level of involvement, social support and networks, and trust in others. The themes covered by the survey are social participation, social networks, and

trust and reciprocity. The survey is particularly useful to investigate use of the Internet for establishing and maintaining contacts with others.

2002 General Social Survey on Social Support and Ageing

This survey is currently in the field and covers the theme of social support for the seniors population. The survey covers much of the content of the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) although the earlier survey looked at social support across all ages, while the 2002 survey focuses on care to seniors. This cycle collects data on help provided to and received by respondents. The survey also collects detailed information on transitions to retirement, retirement planning as well as other topics targeted at an older population.

Unlike all previous cycles of the General Social Survey, the 2002 survey only sampled those respondents aged 45 years of age and up and is expected to provide a sample of approximately 25,000,allowing for considerable analysis of specific sub-populations. Unlike most cycles of the GSS where the sample is obtained by random digit dialling, the frame for this survey was the 2001/02 Canadian Community Health Survey and this will provide detailed information on health status and health utilisation to complement the main contents of the GSS survey. The main themes covered in the survey were social participation and support, life satisfaction and control over one's life, perceived level of safety within neighbourhood of residence and social networks. Results should be made available in June 2003.

Canadian Community Health Survey

The Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) is a new survey first conducted in 2001/02. It is designed to be conducted every two years to collect information on the health status and heath utilisation of the Canadian population, aged 12 and older. The survey will be conducted in two waves. The first year will be a large survey designed to provide reliable cross-sectional estimates at provincial, territorial and health region levels (136 regions). The sample size for the first year of the two-year collection cycle was 131,535. Year two of the collection cycle will have a much smaller estimated sample of 30,000 for the provincial-level survey but will focus on a particular health topic. For the 2002/03 cycle the survey will focus on mental health issues and will include modules, exceptionally important for social capital, such as general health questions and emotional well-being, spirituality, and social support.

The CCHS 2001/02 targets persons aged 12 years or older who are living in private dwellings in the ten provinces and the three territories, excluding persons living on Indian Reserves or Crown lands, clientele of institutions, full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces and residents of certain remote regions.

Some of the more useful sections of the survey from a social capital point of view were found in General Health, Social Support, Spirituality, Contact with Mental Health Professionals, Self-Esteem, Mastery, Depressions, and Mood. Major themes of interest

in the survey were around life satisfaction and levels of empowerment and social networks including contact with family and friends.

National Population Health Survey (NPHS)

The National Population Health Survey is a longitudinal survey designed to collect information related to the health of the Canadian population. It was started in 1994/95 with a sample of 17,276 respondents across ten provinces and is conducted every two years, most recently in 2001/02. For some years there was a cross sectional oversampling of some provinces.

The questionnaire provides provincial and national level data including content related to self-perceived health status, use of health services, determinants of health and a range of demographic and economic information. Sections included in the survey that were most relevant from a social capital point of view were General Health, Restriction of Activities, Self-Esteem, Mastery, Mental Health, Social Support, and Socio-demographic Characteristics.

National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (2000)

This survey, last conducted in 2000 and now planned to be carried out every three years, is an important source of information on Canadian contributory behaviour, including giving, volunteering and participating. A similar survey was conducted in 1997 and a less extensive survey of volunteer activity was conducted in 1987. The 2000 survey provides the most comprehensive assessment of giving, volunteering and participating that has ever been undertaken in Canada. The sample size for the 2000 survey was 14,727 Canadians aged 15 and over.

Sections in the survey that refer to the measurement of social capital were Formal and Informal Volunteering, Reasons for Volunteering or not, Skills gained from Volunteering, Financial Giving to Charitable Organisations, Reasons for Giving and not Giving, Participating, and Attitudes. The survey focused on themes related to volunteering in the local community, level of control over personal and community activities, life satisfaction and social networks, including contact with friends and family.

The Ethnic Diversity Survey

The Ethnic Diversity Survey is a new post-censal survey on ethnicity conducted following the 2001 Census. It will provide new information on what ethnicity means to different people, how Canada's ethnic diversity affects each of us, and the links between ethno-cultural characteristics and socio-economic factors.

Individuals were selected from those who completed the 2001 long census form in May 2001. Selection was based on answers to questions related to ethnic origin, place of birth and parents' place of birth. Selecting people from the census ensures that the survey will reach a sizeable sample of people of many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds,

something not possible in a survey of the general population. The sample size is expected to be 40,000.

The relatively large sample stratified by ethnic and cultural background will provide a unique opportunity to investigate social capital issues in the context of cultural diversity. To facilitate this, the generalised trust question used in the World Values Survey and elsewhere was included in the survey. The survey also includes questions on social participation, voting activity, sense of belonging, life satisfaction, perceived levels of discrimination, sense of safety and levels of social contact. Preliminary findings from the survey will be released in the Fall of 2003.

Participation and Activity Limitation Survey - PALS (2001)

This was another post-censal survey that collected detailed information on persons with disabilities. The 2001 survey sample of an estimated 60,000 individuals was selected during the 2001 census field operations. Data collection took place during the late Summer and Fall of 2001, and data should be available in late 2002. Similar surveys were conducted in 1986 and 1991.

The main research focus of this survey is to look at Canadians whose day-to-day activities may be limited because of a condition or health problem. Survey results will help to identify difficulties and barriers these Canadians may face.

Sections relevant to the measurement of social capital included in the survey are: Activity Limitations Help with Everyday Activities and Social Participation. The major themes of in the survey were around social participation and involvement and social networks including sources of support. There were also a few questions on discrimination and levels of control over one's life. Preliminary results will be released in Spring 2003.

3.   Current Work

2003 General Social Survey on Social Capital

For 2003, Statistics Canada is developing a new survey to measure various dimensions of social capital. Content for the survey was developed in early 2002 and a small field test of the survey was conduced in the Summer of 2002. The survey will be carried out as part of the General Social Survey program. Sample size is expected to be 25,000 and results would become available in mid-2004.

The main modules tested in the survey were related to social and civic participation. The social participation module consisted of questions about contact with relatives, close friends and acquaintances. Dimensions of contact considered included number of contacts, frequency of contact, mode of contact, geographic location of person contacted (e.g. in neighbourhood, city, province, other country), and language used. There were also questions about help given to, and received from, other people.

The module on civic participation included questions on memberships in groups or organisations (e.g. type of organisation, frequency, and use of Internet), volunteer work done, and charitable giving. A short module on political engagement looked at recent voting behaviour as well as participation in other types of political activity. Also included were questions on length of residence, mobility and neighbourhood safety. A module on religious participation asked about religious affiliation, attendance at religious services and religious beliefs.

A module on trust and reciprocity looked at trust of various people using hypothetical questions about situations (e.g. returning lost wallet). Questions were also included about confidence in societal institutions (courts, health, welfare school systems, etc). A short module on values asked about behaviour in various situations (e.g. keeping money from a wallet found, cheating on taxes, etc).

Finally there was a short module related to bridging ties that asked about the importance of establishing ties with others from similar and different cultural backgrounds. The finalised content for the survey will be available in the Fall of 2002 and the survey will be in the field in Winter 2003.

Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL)

The Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL) builds on an earlier survey called the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). The ALL survey is an international initiative. Statistics Canada, the National Centre for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education and the OECD are providing overall direction and project management. The main objective of the ALL survey is to profile the distribution of prose and document literacy, analytic reasoning, attitudes to teamwork, and numeracy in the adult population and the relationship of each of these skills to one another.

The survey is planned to be conducted in 2003 and is both country-specific and internationally comparable, with country-specific sections added to a core international component. The content of the international component has recently been finalised. Although substantial social capital related content was tested, space and time constraints allowed for the inclusion of only two dimensions: levels of participation and sense of well-being. In particular there is a set of questions on volunteer work and participation in organisations, questions on activities outside of work or school (e.g. reading, TV watching) and questions on satisfaction with health and general life satisfaction.

4. Measuring Social Capital

This section summarises the Canadian experience in measuring social capital according to the five themes identified in the ONS paper and used in the matrix in Appendix A.

4.1 Social Participation, Social Engagement and Commitment (SP)

Within this first theme, social capital is looked at through actions such as participation in voluntary organisations, involvement in social clubs or groups, political action and civic engagement, providing help to others and having a sense of belonging to your community. This theme also encompasses the question of homogeneity of a group, whether it is in terms of cultural or ethnic background, language, religion, or other demographic factors. The homogeneity of a group can both produce and stunt the development of social capital. Within a particular group social capital may be produced, however if the group becomes one that is exclusive of others, then the social capital for a community may be reduced. On the other hand, the capital produced by the homogeneous group may also create bridging social capital, as one group may reach out to another, forming more social capital.

In looking through the surveys mentioned above, most had questions dealing with social participation and engagement. The most common questions were those dealing with the type and level of participation within community and volunteer groups. The questions of participation and degree of involvement within an organisation or group displays the investment being made by the respondent, an investment into their community and into themselves. By contributing to a local group, the social capital for the community as a whole can benefit, while the individual will continue to gain trust in others, develop networks and relationships with other members and participants, which may contribute to a higher level of life satisfaction.

The General Social Survey on Access and Use of Information Communication Technology, the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating and the Ethnic Diversity Survey asked questions about civic engagement and voting habits. Although voting habits are classified under social participation, it also reflects a person's perceived control over things in their lives. If there is little trust in the institution of government, or the voting system, then the more likely that a person will not make the effort to vote.

The Ethnic Diversity Survey, the Canadian Community Health Surveys and the 1998 General Social Survey asked about "sense of belonging" to community. This is a relevant question when looking at participation in the community, because a feeling of loyalty and belonging could translate into wanting the best for the community and hence the action of getting involved. While a person who feels irrelevant may not want to be involved at any level.

Things that were rarely covered within this theme by the above mentioned surveys were direct questions about taking positive action about a local issue and perceived barriers to involvement in local groups. Many things could be inferred, but nothing definite. This would be an important issue to look at, especially for communities that have low levels of social participation and conceivably low levels of community social capital.

4.2 Level of Empowerment (LE)

The second theme deals with life satisfaction and the perception of control a person or people have over their lives and the happenings around them. This theme also looks at the level of self-esteem and confidence of the respondent and how that self-assurance allows a person to lead a satisfied lifestyle, possibly through the development of social networks and ties that lead to social capital.

The most common questions used throughout the surveys are "how satisfied are you with your life in general?" and "how much control do you feel that you have in making decisions that affect your everyday life?", as well as a series of agree / disagree statements about specific opinions such as "there is little you can do to change many of the important things in your life" and "you can do just about anything you really set your mind to". These are most useful at getting at a person's perception of control, but cannot be used as a basis for actions. Yet by looking at a perception of life satisfaction and the amount a person participates in volunteer and/or community groups, we try to infer the reasons for contributing to and the outcomes of social capital.

The surveys that had questions most relevant to this theme were the Canadian Community Health Surveys, the National Population Health survey, the National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating and the General Social Survey cycles 1996, 1998, and 2002. The questions were mainly rating general life and health satisfaction and perception of control, while CCHS surveys go much deeper into mental and emotion health questions. The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey and the Ethnic Diversity Survey also asked questions about making everyday decisions and the perceived life satisfaction, respectively. Areas not covered within this theme were questions about perceived control over own health, perceived rights and responsibilities of citizens and perceived influence over political decisions. The latter may be an important determinant for the political activity and voting found within the first theme.

4.3 Perception of Community (PC)

The third theme looks at levels of satisfaction regarding community of residence. This includes satisfaction levels with respect to services available, perceptions of crime and safety within a neighbourhood and satisfaction with quality of life, including the existence of noise pollution and cleanliness of the community.

Most of the surveys that were looked at do not ask questions related to a person's satisfaction with their community, nor do they investigate the happiness with the services available to them. In addition, the only surveys to ask several questions about safety under this theme were the General Social Survey cycles for years 1999 and 2002, which looked at indicators such as "how safe do you feel from crime walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?", "In general, how safe and secure do you feel in your house/apartment?" and "When alone in your home in the evening or at night, do you feel (very worried, somewhat worried, not at all worried about your safety from crime)?". Yet the Ethnic Diversity Survey asked questions such as "How worried are you about

becoming the victim of a crime in Canada because of someone's hatred of your ethnicity, culture, race, skin colour, language, accent or religion?". This theme is the least well covered by the existing Canadian surveys and therefore would be an area that would need development.

4.4 Social Networks, Social Support and Social Interaction (SN)

This theme tends to be the most supported in the discussion of measuring Social Capital. The focus of this section is on social networks, including contact with friend and family, support systems and depth of relationships.   Interaction with others is key to this theme and the benefits from the relationships translates into social capital.

Each survey probed the question of social networks and interactions, but did so in different ways. Most asked questions about contact with friends and family, and in some cases the proximity of friends and family and the frequency of the contact, ranging from visiting in your home to sending emails. Other surveys explored the issue of support from others, where the support comes from relatives and friends, or professional sources.

Particularly in the Participation and Activity Limitation, National Population Health, Canadian Community Health, the Access to and Use of Information Communication Technology and the Aging and Social Support Surveys the questions focused on social support and help, both given and received, with everyday tasks, and general mental and emotional support were investigated. The CCHS and the NPHS both asked whether the respondent had " Someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk?", while the 2000 GSS asked "In the last month, how often did you communicate with family and/or friends, by telephone, by Internet or by regular mail". The 1999, 2000 and 2002 General Social Surveys, along with the Participation and Activity Survey and the Ethnic Diversity survey also looked at the depth of socialisation networks.

4.5 Trust, Reciprocity and Social Cohesion (TR)

The final theme concentrates on trust and reciprocity, trust both in people and institutions. The topic of trust focuses on indicators of perceived fairness of life, including discrimination, trust in others, confidence in institutions and public services and perception of shared values. Trust tends to be an indicator of social capital in that it is a resource that we all draw on when building relationships and interacting with others. Although it is unclear whether trust is a preamble to social networks and social participation or vice versa, it is clear that trust is an important part of social capital.

Several surveys mentioned above did not investigate trust issues, while those that did, looked at trust in others, trust in institutions and experiences of discrimination. It is interesting however that the surveys tap different dimensions of trust. In the Victimisation survey, GSS 1999, there were queries about satisfaction with the police and the justice, the criminal court and the parole systems, while the Ethnic Diversity Survey looked at "How much do you trust people in your family, people in your neighbourhood,

and people that you work with or go to school with?". The Canadian Community Health Survey 2002, the Participation and Activity Limitation and the Ethnic Diversity Surveys all asked questions about discrimination and fairness of life. Both the Ethnic Diversity Survey and the 2000 General Social Survey included the generalised trust questions, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can never be too careful?".

5. Conclusion

As is identified above, the investigation of social capital in Canada is of increasing interest. Many past surveys contain limited information that is relevant to the measurement of social capital, and new initiatives underway, in particular the 2003 General Social Survey, will add greatly to the data available. However much work remains to be done and this will be greatly facilitated by increased international cooperation.

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For more information on the Time-Use survey please visit
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For more information on the Victimisation survey visit
http://www.statcan.ca/english/sdds/4504.htm

For further information on the Access to and Use of Information Communication
Technology Survey please visit
http://www.statcan.ca/english/sdds/4505.htm

For further information on the survey please visit
http://www.statcan.ca/english/sdds/3226.htm

For more information on the National Population Health Survey please visit
http://www.statcan.ca/english/sdds/3225.htm

For more information on the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating
please visit
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For further information on the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey please visit
http://www.statcan.ca/english/survey/household/activity/activity.htm

For further information of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey please visit
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For further information on Statistics Canada please visit
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