



social capital

better
together

What is social capital?

“Social capital” refers to the friendships, acquaintances, and working relationships that tie people together. The bonds of social capital make neighborhoods safer, schools better, and people healthier. When individuals are invested in each other and their communities, they are more likely to vote, volunteer, care for one another, and cooperate even when they have differences. Social capital has both individual and collective elements that affect our lives and the well-being of our businesses and towns.

“If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.” — Yogi Berra

Why does it matter?

A growing body of research* shows that communities with higher levels of social capital are likely to see more educational achievement, better-performing governments, stronger economies, and less crime and violence. People living in these communities actually report being happier, healthier, and living longer.

Where social capital is strong, it is easier to mobilize people to tackle problems. It is easier to take advantage of opportunities that benefit everyone.

Princeton Area
Community
Foundation

connecting people who care
with causes that matter
across central new jersey

How can we increase our social capital?

Did you know that each additional ten minutes a day spent commuting by car reduces by 10% a person’s engagement in community affairs — political and religious activities, volunteering, and social interaction? Things that free us from our cars can reverse that. So can anything that makes our towns more livable. That’s what planners mean when they talk about “Smart Growth” — achieving a unique sense of community and place through compact, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, and streets that work for everyone. As we know, space is tight in central New Jersey, and all our communities are being challenged to manage their future growth.

Many important issues in the region, from transportation planning to residential and commercial development, touch people in more than one town. Having strong social capital ensures that all perspectives are heard and reflected in decisions that affect many people.

“Come to our breakfast. We’ll come to your fire.”
— Volunteer firefighters’ fundraising T-shirt

Kids are natural connectors. We can learn a lot from them. We can also make sure we are teaching them the fun of reaching out to others.



How good is our social capital in central New Jersey?

We are all familiar with common measures of community vitality — real estate values; school enrollments, educational attainment, and taxes; traffic flow; parking; acres of preserved open space; income; crime. But these statistics miss many quality-of-life factors, such as how well we know and trust our neighbors, merchants, and co-workers; how well we support our local non-profit organizations by volunteering; how often we get to know new people; how often we just kick back and have fun with family and friends; how engaged we are as voters; and how active we are as citizens in local affairs. The [2007 Central New Jersey Social Capital Benchmark Survey](#) provides a clarifying new lens through which to view and understand ourselves.

The survey shows that, on average, residents here enjoy levels of social and interracial trust that are comparable to or higher than other parts of the U.S. We are significantly better educated. We work and commute two hours less per week than the national average.

So the survey raises challenging questions. If we have fewer constraints because our education, income, and trust levels exceed the national average, and we are no busier than others, how is it that we score only average in our rate of civic engagement and volunteerism? Are we living up to our potential?

Social capital comes in two kinds. “Bonding” social capital, a kind of glue that holds people together, arises naturally between people with things in common. “Bridging” social capital helps people with differing backgrounds and concerns see where their interests can mesh. It works as a kind of social WD-40. Bridging is especially valuable, because overcoming frictions and sticking points is essential for any kind of progress.

“We need to see things we are doing in a new light — as a social-capital adventure.” says Community Foundation president Nancy Kieling. “Farmers markets are friendship-forming places. Open-air concerts and street fairs let us bump into people we know. We should treat picnics as an opportunity to meet new people, and see choral groups as making more than music.”

“The workplace is a great place to encourage civic engagement and social connectedness,” notes Chamber CEO Karen Colimore. “Strong social capital at work translates directly to greater productivity inside and outside the corporation.”

The start gun has gone off! Over the next several years the Community Foundation, with \$2.5 million in local grants, and the Chamber Foundation with programs of its own, will be helping you to expand civic engagement at home and at work, in your neighborhood, in your town, and regionally. Use the list on page four to see how easy it is to become richer in social capital.

In five years we are going to do a follow-up survey to find out whether social capital levels are rising where you live. If each one of us works at it, it’s likely we will be happier, be healthier, and live longer.

Want to live in a great community?

Look around. You already do. Reach out. Join in. We’re better together.

RESOURCES

* Visit www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro for more information on *The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America*, an initiative of Professor Robert D. Putnam at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, and author of the book, *Bowling Alone*.

Go to www.bettertogether.org to read “BetterTogether,” the final report of the Saguaro Seminar.

The Princeton Area Community Foundation has worked in central New Jersey since 1991 to bring people together across whatever divides them. www.pacf.org

The Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation brings the ideas and energy of the region’s business community to bear on improving civic engagement. www.princetonchamberfoundation.org

Cover photo: **The Blawenburg Band** performs a summer concert bringing many people together for community fun at a local shopping center.

How you can grow *our* social capital

Social capital is built through hundreds of everyday actions, large and small, that we all do. Here are some ideas to get you started. You probably already do many of them. Try some new ones and watch what happens. Build trust. Get involved. Look around. Reach out. Join in. Be more, together. Have fun!

11 things organizations and workers can do

- Encourage groups to hold meetings at your site
- Invite local government officials to speak at your workplace
- Give employees time (e.g., 3 days per year) to work on civic projects
- Offer a group of your employees to clean up a local park or cemetery
- Create a team to help with a home building or renovation project
- Start a lunch gathering or a discussion group with co-workers
- Start or join a carpool
- Go with colleagues to a ball game (and root, root, root for the home team!)
- Help scrape ice off, or jump-start, a co-worker's car
- Organize a fitness/health group with your colleagues
- Mentor a young co-worker

12. _____
13. _____

42 things you can do anytime

- Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor
- Register to vote and vote, every time
- Support local merchants
- Start a community garden
- Help fix someone's flat tire
- Join the local Elks, Kiwanis, or Knights of Columbus
- Sing in a choir
- Attend Memorial Day parades and 4th of July fireworks
- Form a tool lending library with neighbors and share ladders, snow blowers, etc.
- Eat breakfast at a local gathering spot on the weekend and mingle
- Join the volunteer fire or EMS squad
- Stand at a major intersection holding a sign for your favorite candidate

- Persuade a local restaurant to have a designated "meet people" table
- Say "thanks" to public servants—police, EMS, rescue squads, firefighters, town clerks, teachers
- Plant tree seedlings along your street with neighbors and rotate care for them
- Talk with those you see every day on your commuter train
- Carpool to the station with them
- Enroll in a class and get to know your classmates
- Say hello to strangers
- Log off and go to the park
- Say hello when you spot an acquaintance in a store
- Exercise together or take walks with friends or family
- Collect oral histories from older town residents
- **Tell friends and family what social capital is and why it matters!**
- Read the local news faithfully
- Fix it even if you didn't break it
- Pick it up even if you didn't drop it
- Attend a public meeting
- Hire young people for odd jobs
- Sit on your stoop and greet passers-by
- Be nice when you drive
- Join or start a mall-walking group and have coffee together afterwards
- Become a story-reader or babyrocker at a childcare center or neighborhood pre-school
- Open the door for someone who has his or her hands full
- Offer to watch your neighbor's home or apartment while they are away
- See if your neighbor needs anything when you run to the store
- Join groups (e.g., arts, sports, religion) likely to lead to making new friends across race/ethnicity, social class or other social cleavages
- Walk your dog in a different neighborhood or park
- Tutor someone
- Read bulletin boards & try something new
- Take a stray cart back to the store
- Talk to store clerks and cashiers. Find out what you have in common.

43. _____
44. _____

Got more ideas to share?
Send them to bettertogether@pacf.org