

INTRODUCTION: A CIVIC NATION AT RISK

From Eastport Maine, to Tuscon, Arizona, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange works with local arts organizations and community residents to produce evening-length dance performances to celebrate community resiliency in the face of difficult times. Besides dance, the “Hallelujah” projects involve singing, storytelling, and local conversations about the importance of working together for the good of all.

In an Ann Arbor, Michigan, neighborhood, four young couples decide to get together every Tuesday night for dinner and conversation, rotating the cooking and cleaning responsibilities. A few months after its inception, this supper club evolves into the neighborhood’s unofficial organizing committee, sponsoring block parties, movie outings and other social affairs.

In Washington, D.C., a non-profit organization is assembling a group of 125 emerging leaders under 40 years old who have begun making a difference in the Capital city. These leaders’ contributions, in areas from public education to crime reduction, have not yet been fully recognized by local foundations, media, or leadership programs. But under the auspices of an 18-month leadership program sponsored by the nonprofit Local Initiative Support Training and Education Network (LISTEN), these young social entrepreneurs will form friendships and partnerships with one another and, it is hoped, evolve into Washington’s next generation of civic stewards.

In state capitals across the country, a non-profit job-training and civic-education group known as YouthBuild holds “advocacy days” for young disadvantaged adults. These young people meet with state and federal legislators to discuss problems affecting the young people and their communities. One advocacy day participant, leaving a U.S. Senator’s office, summarized his first meaningful experience with civic participation: “To think I wasted years dealing drugs when I could have been doing this – telling legislators what matters to me!”

Oklahoma MetaFund, a virtual community development corporation serves as a connector and broker, linking civic leaders in counties statewide with bankers who will provide start-up capital for economic development projects, including micro-businesses in the civic leaders’ communities. The founders created the fund in the recognition that, in forging a prosperous community, *whom* you know – your social network - matters more than *what* you know.

In Kentucky, an educational advocacy group called the Prichard Committee trains parents across the state to be civic leaders in their children’s schools. The parents learn how to run meetings, analyze information, prepare agendas, and, most importantly, recruit other parents to get involved.

These examples represent America at its best: a nation of helpers, joiners, and good citizens bent on building community in a big, diverse, modern nation. Notwithstanding its reputation as a land of rugged individualists and cutthroat capitalists, America throughout its history has been exceptionally civic-minded by any standard. We are a nation rich in “social capital,” which we define as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹ Americans have a remarkable proclivity to reach out to one another, to lend a hand to others in need, and to organize groups to advance the commonwealth. This ability has earned the respect and admiration of international observers at least since Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous insight in the 1830s that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations.”²

Americans

Tuning in

But not

Turning out

Why worry

About vanishing dinner parties,

Bowling leagues,

Or voters?

Joining a group

Boosts your life expectancy

As much as quitting smoking

A Civic Fabric Badly Frayed

And yet, at the dawn of the 21st century, America faces a civic crisis. Once-commonplace activities such as the dinner parties and community arts performances described above are slowly vanishing from the American landscape. Increasingly, Americans are withdrawing from communal life, choosing to live alone and play alone. No longer participants, we are becoming mere observers of our collective destiny. Most Americans see no obvious connection between dinner parties and the health of American society and democracy. More worrisome is the fact that many Americans fail to see the connection between political participation and the nation's well being. However, without strong habits of social and political participation, the world's longest and most successful experiment in democracy is at risk of losing the very norms, networks, and institutions of civic life that have made us the most emulated and respected nation in history. The reversal of this downward spiral is critical to the civic and social health of our nation.

***every 10 minutes of commuting time
cuts all forms of civic engagement
by 10%***

Why Social Capital Matters

Research has begun to show how powerfully social capital, or its absence, affects the well being of individuals, organizations, and nations. Economics studies demonstrate that social capital makes workers more productive, firms more competitive, and nations more prosperous. Psychological research indicates that abundant social capital makes individuals less prone to depression and more inclined to help others. Epidemiological reports show that social capital decreases the rate of suicide, colds, heart attacks, strokes, and cancer, and improves individuals' ability to fight or recover from illnesses once they have struck. Sociology experiments suggest that social capital reduces crime, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, welfare dependency, and drug abuse, and increases student test scores and graduation rates. From political science, we know that extensive social capital makes government agencies more responsive, efficient, and innovative. And from our own personal experience we know that social capital makes navigating life a whole lot easier: our friends and family members cheer us up when we're down, bring us chicken soup when we're sick, offer job leads when we're unemployed, baby-sit our kids when we're away away, join us at the movies when we're bored, give us loans when we're broke, and remember our birthdays when even we forget them.

It is becoming increasingly clear that social capital has an enormous array of practical benefits to individuals and to communities. What is more, social capital has what economists call "positive externalities." That is, networks of trust and reciprocity not only benefit those within them, but also those outside them. Consequently, when social capital is depleted, people suffer in clear and measurable ways, and there is a ripple effect beyond a scattering of lonely individuals. Shoring up our stocks of social capital, therefore, represents one of the most promising approaches for remedying all sorts of social ills.

Yet the national stockpile of social capital has been seriously depleted over the past 30 years. By virtually every measure, today's Americans are more disconnected from one another and from the institutions of civic life than at any time since statistics have been kept. Whether as family members, neighbors, friends, or citizens, we are tuning out rather than turning out.

The Erosion of Social Capital in America

The most familiar example of civic decline is Americans' growing refusal to go to the polls. Casting a ballot in national elections has dropped by roughly 25% since the mid-1960s. There has been an even bigger decline – between 30% and 40% – in how many Americans work for a political party, serve as an officer of a club or organization, serve on an organizational committee, attend a school or community meeting, or attend a political event.³ Even purely pleasurable get-togethers are becoming increasingly scarce. For example, the number of times per year that Americans entertain friends at home has dropped by 45% since the mid-1970s, and the fraction of Americans who go to others' homes to socialize has plunged nearly that much since the early 1980s.⁴ Once-familiar social activities – picnicking, playing cards with friends, even hanging out at the neighborhood bar – are fast becoming relics of a bygone era. Families, too, are spending less time together than they used to. Parents and their children are about one-third less likely to take vacations together, watch television together, or even chat with one another.⁵ In a recent YMCA survey, American adolescents said “not having enough time together” with parents ranked as their top concern. More than four in ten parents said they didn't have enough time to spend with their kids – mainly because of work obligations.⁶

Our feelings about one another and about our communal obligations have also changed in distressing ways over the past generation. Only about a third of Americans think most other people can be trusted, down from more than half of Americans who were trusting in 1960. There has been an equally steep decline since the early 1950s in the belief that Americans are as honest and moral as they used to be. These trends are troubling for two important reasons. First, our perception of others affects our willingness to work and socialize together. Second, and worse, our perceptions may reflect an actual decline in trustworthiness. Perhaps it is no surprise that we are fast building two kinds of walled societies: gated communities and prisons.

Americans have become less public-spirited in less visible ways, as well. Even as the number of charitable organizations has exploded, the fraction of our national income contributed to them has shrunk. We are more likely to ignore traffic signals and to gesticulate rudely at fellow drivers. Americans overwhelmingly believe that our culture has become coarse and uncivil.

What Caused our Civic Decline?

Why has our civic infrastructure collapsed, bringing our civility down with it? A massive analysis by political scientist Robert Putnam demonstrates that the single most important cause of the decline in social capital is an irreversible demographic shift. Namely, an exceptionally civic generation of older Americans is slowing down and dying, and far less civic-minded generations of Baby Boomers and Baby Busters are taking their place.⁷ Other profound and durable social changes have only magnified the generational impact. Entertainment television, a veritable death ray for civic life, has become our primary source of information and relaxation, crowding out more sociable leisure-time activities. Women have poured into the formal labor force, opening new doors for them but also sapping the neighborhood and voluntary organizations that used to flourish under unpaid female leadership. In a consumption-mad, booming economy, working professionals with civic leadership skills face increasing pressure to work long hours and weekends, forcing them to skip school meetings and family dinners. And the proliferation of suburbs and exurbs, with their car-focused culture and absence of community spaces, has distanced neighbor from neighbor, all but eliminating the sorts of casual interactions on which yesterday's small towns and urban neighborhoods thrived. This steep decline in social capital, not surprisingly, has affected all of us: Black, White, Native American, Latino, Asian American; male and female; young and middle-aged; city dwellers, suburbanites, and rural residents; professionals and blue-collar employees.

A Call to Connect

At the dawn of her 225th year, the United States embodies a multitude of contradictions. Americans are both fabulously rich and desperately poor; religiously ebullient yet spiritually empty; civically aging yet demographically young. The decline in social capital is related in complex ways to these trends, and the need to rebuild social capital becomes ever more important in light of them.

America's civic culture cannot be restored without deliberate effort. We need nothing less than a sustained, broad-based social movement to restore civic virtue and civic participation in America. Fortunately, now is a time of unprecedented opportunity for nurturing community. After a decade of economic growth, and the elimination of the staggering federal deficit, we can confidently turn some of our newfound prosperity to civic, not just material, ends. The social problems that once seemed intractable – an epidemic of gun violence in the biggest cities, soaring rates of teenage pregnancy, smoking and drug abuse – have begun to recede. Technological innovation is occurring at lightning speed, bringing with it new means to connect citizens and to foster civic participation.

Even though massive changes in citizens' attitudes and behavior will be necessary, starting that process may be far less daunting than the magnitude of the crisis might suggest. As with financial capital, modest investments in social capital generate impressive long-run returns. Social capital is self-reinforcing. Just as a small amount of money becomes a fortune as interest compounds over time, a small investment in social capital creates a "virtuous circle" in which good deeds beget good deeds.

America is famous for facing our problems and going about solving them. Countless individuals and institutions already are toiling in varying degrees of obscurity to revive communities and to reconnect individuals. We salute these leaders – whether they be the 18-to-32-year-old Generation X “social entrepreneurs,” who have created a national network of community-service corps; or older Americans, who have brought the national rate of volunteering to its highest level in recent memory; or pastors, who are spearheading massive community-building projects in central cities. America needs to honor and learn from these efforts, and to carry them out on a much broader scale.

If we are to solve our civic crisis, we will need a wholesale change in the institutions that structure our private, professional, social, and public lives. Many of our institutions lack vibrancy and have failed to accommodate changes in the way we live our lives. We need to replace outdated institutions with new, more relevant institutions and to help existing institutions retool for the 21st century. For example, employers and labor laws still assume that Daddy works while Mommy stays home to tend to domestic matters, even though very few families (about 20%) fit this description anymore. Similarly, the political establishment assumes that voters want to be polled and pandered to, even when there is ample evidence that they instead want visionary, courageous leaders who see politics as a truly deliberative and participatory process. To make broad citizen engagement easier and more rewarding, it is up to us, as individuals, to change the organizations with which we are affiliated. Federal, state, and local governments, employers, universities, museums, human-services agencies, youth groups, schools, houses of worship, and even families will have to try new approaches.

To be sure, the magnitude of necessary change will vary enormously both across and within categories of institutions. Some institutions – youth groups and houses of worship, for example – already consider the creation of social capital as central to their mission. But even among institutions for which social capital building is at most a secondary goal – government agencies, workplaces, schools, and families, for example – we can see remarkable efforts to nurture trust, connectedness, and civic engagement. Building on these farsighted efforts, we must increase the supply of opportunities for civic engagement, as well as the demand. We need not only *more* civic engagement, but also *better* civic engagement. Every institution must make building social capital a principal goal or core value.

Principles for Building Social Capital

Throughout this report, we offer principles of social capital building to guide institutional leaders. Some of these principles are specially tailored to specific types of institutions, and they are discussed in the next five chapters. Here we suggest four principles that are broadly applicable across categories of organizations: the *Social Capital Impact Principle*; the *Recycling Principle*; the *Bridging Principle*; and the *C2C Principle*.

The Social Capital Impact Principle. The frame of “social capital” helps us to see the world afresh. Social capital is not only a resource, but it is also a lens for evaluating institutions, programs, and individual behavior. Looking through a social capital lens, for example, we see front porches not as an architectural frill, but as an effective strategy for building strong, safe, friendly neighborhoods. Consistent use of the social capital lens can both prevent civically harmful decisions and guide us toward civically beneficial choices. Much in the way America is developing “diversity” as a lens for judging the performance of employers in recruiting and retaining workers, and “environmental impact” is factored in judging the wisdom of economic development projects, we will become a better place when the “social capital impact” becomes a standard part of institutional and individual decision-making.

The Recycling Principle. Unlike financial capital, social capital has an interesting and valuable property: It is not expended when it is drawn upon. Instead, drawing upon our stocks of social capital usually generates even more. Therefore, as individuals and institutional decision-makers, we must imagine innovative ways to “recycle” existing stocks of social capital to create new stocks of different forms. For example, the political movement for women’s suffrage emerged, in part, from non-political literary circles.

The Bridging Principle. Social capital may be categorized in many ways. One important way is the degree to which the connections reinforce similarities among individuals, or span differences. Alliances between people who are more alike than they are different are called “*bonding*” social capital. Connections between people who are different along some important dimension – such as race, socioeconomic status, or gender – are referred to as “*bridging*” social capital. Although both bonding and bridging networks are valuable, we believe that Americans should put a special emphasis on creating “bridging” social capital. Research shows that building connections across groups is especially valuable for everything from getting a job to securing important social and political rights.⁸ For example, a recent study concluded that decent wages and working conditions for immigrant farmworkers were secured only after organizers brought together an ethnically, religiously, and socio-economically diverse group of people to work on the issue.⁹ Creating bridging social capital will become even more critical as the nation grows more crowded and diverse and seeks to maintain social harmony and prosperity.

The “C2C” Principle. The cultural disempowerment of citizens is a cause of the decline in individual willingness to assume leadership roles in civic life. In the emerging language of the “dot com” world, C2C refers to communications that occur “consumer to consumer.” We expand that definition to mean “citizen to citizen” and “community to community.” Vertical communication between “experts” and “laymen” has come to characterize too much of our interactions and has legitimized the illegitimate notion that regular folks don’t have much to offer one another. Efforts to build social capital must strengthen horizontal communication and reciprocity among peers. Self-help groups are founded on this principle and have used it successfully to fight alcoholism and help people cope with traumatic events in their lives.

A Civic Renaissance

This is not the first time that America has had to overcome a crisis of civic life. During the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, spanning roughly 1870-1915, rapid industrialization, immigration, technological change, and urbanization disrupted traditional patterns of community organization. These forces loosed people from the structures, on the farm or in the old country, that had anchored their lives, and proceeded to thrust them into a state of personal uncertainty and social disorganization. Predictably, the nation showed symptoms associated with declining social capital: crime waves, political corruption, urban decay, a widening income gap, and poorly functioning schools.

Alarmed by these trends, civic and social entrepreneurs from San Francisco to Denver to Chicago to Boston set about creating a new set of institutions to create community in ways that fit their new lives. They led others to connect with one another and to change a system that was no longer working. Indeed, many of the nation’s most prominent voluntary organizations, most significant political reforms, and most visionary organizers were products of that time. From Jane Addams to Teddy Roosevelt, from the private ballot to female suffrage, from the NAACP to the YMCA, the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era produced a legacy that has served the nation well for more than a century.

Today, as we enter a new century fraught with vast demographic and technological challenges, we need to harness the civic energy that our Progressive forebears found, repeating their feats while learning from their errors. We need to become civic and social entrepreneurs who create social-capital-building institutions suiting our times and honoring our values: diversity, tolerance, inclusiveness, equality, fairness, compassion, hope, and public spiritedness. We need a new civic renaissance.

The Saguaro Seminar Journey

The Saguaro Seminar is composed of leaders of institutions that have been struggling, each in its own way, to rebuild civic bonds and restore connections among individuals. We are a diverse group of about three dozen people who, for three years, have met several times a year to deliberate about the state of social capital in America and to debate proposals for reinvigorating civic life. Our group includes young adults at the beginning of their careers and older adults heading into retirement. We come from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and hold a range of religious beliefs. We represent small towns and large cities; East, Midwest, and West; and North and South. Among us are clergy members and political leaders, union officials and businesspeople, non-profit executives and philanthropists, professors and community organizers, artists and youth workers. In the course of our professional and extracurricular lives, most of us have moved in and out of several different fields (from for-profit to non-profit work, for example) and straddled dual roles (such as preacher and charity executive) at any given time. We are Republicans and Democrats who share a concern about frayed social bonds and the cynicism and alienation souring our public life. We discuss our values in greater detail in the Appendix, “Changing the Wind.”

In the next five chapters, we explore five institutional arenas in which the business or rebuilding social capital must take place. In each chapter, we discuss the particular advantages of each category of institution in reengaging Americans; outline historical trends relevant to building social capital in each institutional arena; and offer guiding principles and specific recommendations in the five arenas for turning around our civic decline. The five chapters are as follows:

The Workplace. This chapter examines how the assumptions, laws, and structures of employment can be transformed to bolster family and civic life.

The Arts. This chapter examines the potential of artists and cultural organizations to unite people in creative endeavors that build and celebrate community.

Politics and Government. This chapter examines troubles plaguing American democracy and suggests ways that citizens and political leaders can enhance civic interest and participation.

Religion. This chapter examines the role of houses of worship and other faith-based organizations in healing spiritual, cultural, and social problems.

Schools, Youth Organizations, and Families. This chapter examines ways to engage America’s young people, who are the next generation of social capitalists.

We conclude with thoughts on how to build a civic renaissance in a post-modern nation of interstates, internationalism, and the Internet.

Our Discussion: Rebuilding our Civic Infrastructure

Our three years of discussions have reinforced our fear of the status quo: Americans face real dangers if we do nothing about our civic malaise. Individually and collectively we must find ways to erase our social capital deficit, or we will no longer have, to paraphrase civic leader Jimmy Carter, a society as good as its people. We must act now to reconnect ourselves with the larger civic project that is the United States. It will take a critical mass of outspoken and visionary individuals and institutions to make this happen. Cynicism is our greatest enemy.

The challenges to rebuild our civic infrastructure are collectively huge, but not Herculean for any given individual. What if every American entertained friends a few more times per year? What if every teacher had one more discussion per month with students about issues in the local community? What if every candidate for public office asked for campaign volunteers in the same letter asking for campaign contributions? What if every boss gave his or her employees paid time off to attend parent-teacher conferences? These quiet, small steps could multiply in wholly unexpected and significant ways. We ask you to become part of this new movement, both by changing your own lives in small but meaningful (and enjoyable) ways and by recruiting friends, colleagues, and relatives to this most civic of causes.

NOTES:

¹ We have adopted the political scientist Robert Putnam's definition. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 19.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Vol. 2, Book 2, Chapter V (New York: Borzoi Books of Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 45.

⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 99.

⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 101.

⁶ "Talking With Teens: The YMCA Parent and Teen Survey Final Report," May 2000, at <http://www.ymca.net>

⁷ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, section III.

⁸ On the importance of bridging social capital for job attainment, see Mark S. Granovetter, *Getting a Job* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Mary Corcoran, Linda Datcher, and Greg Duncan, "Most Workers Find Jobs through Word of Mouth" *Monthly Labor Review* (August 1980), 33-35; and James H. Johnson Jr., Elisa Jayne Bienenstock, and Walter C. Farrell Jr., "Bridging Social Networks and Female Labor Force Participation in a Multi-Ethnic Metropolis," in *Prismatic Metropolis: Analyzing Inequality in Los Angeles*, ed. Lawrence D. Bobo, Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson Jr., and Abel Valenzuela (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

⁹ Marshall Ganz, "Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959-1966." *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (4), January 2000, 1003-1062.

Pull-out text sources: On the relative benefits of joining groups versus not smoking see James S. House, Karl R. Landis, and Debra Umberson, "Social Relationships and Health," *Science* 241 (1988), 540-545; Lisa F. Berkman, "The Role of Social Relations in Health Promotion" *Psychosomatic Medicine* 57 (1995), 245-254; and Teresa E. Seeman, "Social Ties and Health: The Benefits of Social Integration" *Annual of Epidemiology* 6 (1966), 442-451. For information on the connection between commuting time and social capital, see *Bowling Alone*, p. 213.