



## The Importance of Social Capital

Posted by [Glenn](#) on June 19, 2006 - 8:45pm in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

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### *Relative Measure of Social Capital by US States*

I am now near the end of my reading of Robert Putnam's seminal work on Social Capital, [Bowling Alone](#). Social Capital is one of those very hard to define subjects, but my interpretation is that it measures the level of trust, connectedness and mutual reciprocity in society. This is important for a wide range of issues from child rearing to economic development to how individuals (or communities) respond to a crisis situations. Social Capital could be the defining characteristic of communities that pull together in the face of high oil prices versus those that tear themselves apart in the ultimate tragedy of the commons.

Looking at a map of the US you can start to understand why North Dakota and Vermont, despite their cold winters may be better places to live than Mississippi or Alabama. And this is only state level averages - each state will have within them communities that are stronger than others. And each community will have individuals that have more social capital than others because of their level of civic involvement. Those individuals and those communities will be one of our greatest assets as peak oil forces us out of our private cocoons - McMansions and SUVs - run on high levels of energy consumption and forces us to live in more shared living spaces, carpooling, etc.

What is the state of social capital and what are the major measures available?

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One of the best measures, is involvement in community based volunteer organizations. You can see the first half of the Century represented a dramatic rise in the membership of these organizations, which was interrupted by the Great Depression and then accelerated greatly in the World War II era all the way to the late 1950s. Then it reached a peak in 1960, a plateau during the 60s and declined steadily from from there to the present day.

This can also be seen in the number of people serving as an officer in an organization...

...Club meeting attendance...

...Which appears to be associated with less trustful individuals and even less trustful teenagers...

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Putnam also shows how this is linked to declines in all types of political participation from voting to signing a petition to running for office.

So, Does this matter? Well if you want well educated kids...

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better public health

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and lower crime, it seems to be pretty good.

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And for those of you who think in even more Hobbesian terms, people with less social capital seem ready for a fist fight

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But many of you may think that this may all have to do with the level of ethnic or religious similarity which leads to social cohesion. But the best indicator of tolerance for differences lies in states with higher social capital.

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Maybe that's because there is more economic equality...

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...and civic equality

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Based on this I would say that high levels of social capital seems like a good thing to have in your area. The main causes of the decline in social capital based on the statistical data from Putnam's book are:

1. Generational Change - The slow replacement of the highly participatory WWII "greatest generation" by the more individualistic Baby Boom and cynical Gen X & Y kids. (50%)
2. TV - The dramatic rise in TV viewing hours per day crowding out civic participation in many ways. (20%)
3. Sprawl - Increasing distances between home, work, shopping, friends, etc have decreased local involvement because of time pressures and less feeling of local attachment. (15%)
4. Work - The pressures of time and money, two career families, loss of the local merchant class through nationalization and globalization have removed many pillars of the community from their position of status in return for low everyday prices. (15%)

I haven't completely made up my mind about what the answers are at a societal level, but at a personal level I plan to do the following:

1. Try to watch less TV by going out in the evening more with friends, to civic meetings, and may join a sport that I can commit to regular participation.
2. Never move more than 10 miles from my office (currently am about 2 miles away). Continue to work in a job that has a good life-work balance.
3. Continue to live in a downtown area instead of the suburbs - consider moving to a small

town with higher levels of civic participation if things get bad. Small towns are better than inner city and inner city is better than the suburbs.

4. Challenge other members of my generation to become more civic minded and involved in their local community institutions. Strengthen my connection to my friends and relatives through more direct contact.

**[editor's note, by Prof. Goose]** And [here](#) is a link to a story and a list of resources that was done on this topic.



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