

DEMOS

# SOCIAL CAPITAL 2025

THE CASE FOR  
STRENGTHENING SOCIAL  
BONDS TO PREVENT CRIME

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**Local Trust**

FEBRUARY 2025



national network  
for neighbourhood  
improvement

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This project was supported by Local Trust.

Published by Demos February 2025  
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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dan Crowe and Millie Dessent from Local Trust for massively helpful feedback on drafts. We also thank Professor Ichiro Kawachi (Social and Behavioral Sciences, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health) for his review and excellent comments.

This report does not represent the views of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology or HMG.

**Mags Lesiak and Adam Coutts**

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, written by the academics Mags Lesiak (University of Cambridge, Fellow at the Government Office for Science and Technology) and Adam Coutts (University of Cambridge) examines the research on the relationship between social capital and crime. It is concerned with a fundamental question: whether a person's social capital (i.e. personal networks and community cohesion) reduces the risk that they will break the law.

It is the last in a series published by Demos in partnership with Local Trust and 3ni, called **Social Capital 2025**. The series examines social capital and the contribution that strengthening it makes to improving economic and social outcomes, including for children, health outcomes, wellbeing and reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.

This series sits at the intersection of two pillars of Demos's work. The first, the **Citizen Economy**, looks at how to align the interests of citizens and the economy. We argue we need to embed a 'citizen' mindset in all the institutions in our economy, putting our shared interests at the heart of decision making. The second focuses on **Public Service Reform**, which we argue should empower citizens and workers and put them at the heart of public services in order to increase productivity and improve outcomes. In this series we make the case that strengthening social capital through concerted government action will ultimately fuel economic growth and community wellbeing and create a virtuous cycle. It builds on ideas we first presented in the paper [The Preventative State](#).

# FOREWORD

## BY MATT LEACH



Earlier this year, with fellow members of the new Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, I visited a deprived neighbourhood on the edge of a seaside town on the south coast of England. On that estate, not long ago, young men would stretch lengths of wire or rope across the road, knocking riders off mopeds which they could then swoop in and steal. Bricks were regularly thrown at buses of an evening, resulting in them no longer visiting the estate. Local people found it harder to get to jobs or access services in the town centre, compounding issues of poverty and deprivation in the area. People started moving out, and the area became increasingly stigmatised.

Ten years on, the neighbourhood has turned around, with crime levels no higher than anywhere else in the town, young families looking to move in to in-demand housing, and vibrant civic life centred around a buzzing local community centre. What made the difference?

Local people identify two main contributors. First, some limited physical regeneration of the bit of the estate where trouble was most concentrated had removed the focus for anti-social behaviour. And, alongside that, small-scale but sustained investment through Local Trust's Big Local programme that has helped build local neighbourhood organisations and revitalise the previously run-down community centre, providing activities, networks and community for people across the area. It has proved so successful over the last decade that the local authority recently confirmed investment of regeneration funds in building an extension to the building so it can do even more into the future.

Why is this important? If the government is to meet its promise to "take back our streets," it needs to find new ways to reduce offending, ensure public safety and reduce the fear of crime that can blight some communities. With all parts of the criminal justice system already at capacity, and limited resources to deploy, there is much to learn from the impact of neighbourhood investment in the social infrastructure of our most troubled places – and the ways in which a relatively small but sustained investment in building and enabling social capital can have a transformatory impact.

This paper is the fourth in a series produced in partnership with Demos and 3ni highlighting how social capital may provide the key to achieving a range of national and local policy goals. It builds on the second and third papers in this series, which demonstrate how social capital can create a protective barrier around children and families and support people to live healthier lives, reducing burdens on public services. In the first report, published in January 2025, Andy Haldane and David Halpern highlighted the importance of social capital to economic prosperity.

At a time of growing demand for services and challenging public finances, I'd hope that, individually and together, this collection of reports and evidence reviews make a case for social capital's long overdue return to the centre of the policy debate.

**Matt Leach, Chief Executive, Local Trust**

# INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between social capital and crime. It specifically considers the evidence on whether personal networks and community cohesion affect a person's propensity to break the law.

Victim-based crime has broadly decreased over the last 10 years (with some notable exceptions, such as sexual assault and stalking). Nonetheless, there are persistent social and geographical inequalities in crime rates which have proven difficult to address. A better grasp of the underlying influences of these trends will help inform more effective policy interventions to prevent and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour at the local level.

There is a considerable body of research which suggests that social capital (i.e. community networks and support structures which foster trust and connection) reduces a person's propensity to break the law. This benefit is transmitted in several ways, including by forming and reinforcing positive behavioural norms and shaping environments to discourage criminal activity. This paper provides an overview of each of these areas of research, and some theories on how these factors interact, before presenting some guidelines for policymakers to consider when shaping programmes to tackle crime, particularly at community level.

There is a considerable body of research which suggests that **social capital** (*i.e. community networks and support structures which foster trust and connection*) **reduces a person's propensity to break the law.**

# THE EVIDENCE LANDSCAPE

The evidence is unequivocal that there is a link between social capital and reduced criminality. At an individual level, people with networks that contain positive bonding and bridging social capital are less likely to commit crime, whilst communities with healthy social bonds enjoy lower crime rates. This section provides an overview of the evidence to explain why this is the case.

## THE INDIVIDUAL

### Morality

Research suggests that the emotions and values associated with morality impact a person's crime propensity by influencing their perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Self-control is a decisive factor in how far personal morality is exercised in the face of temptations and provocations. (Wikström, 2009; Wikström et al., 2015, 2017).

In turn, there is a large body of evidence that suggests a person's morality is highly dependent on the *social norms* in which individuals are raised as children and live as adults: psychological (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977), sociological (Mellor and Shilling, 2023) and economic (Boulding, 1969) theories of moral development have all concluded that social norms dictate individual morality. This can be achieved through the following mechanisms:

- Socialisation (Grusec et al., 2013),
- Internalisation (Blasi, 2001),
- Conformity (Kundu and Cummins, 2013); and
- Reinforcement.

*Socialisation* is the process by which individuals learn to adopt the values, norms, and practices of their society. From early childhood, socialisation occurs through the network of family, peers, schools, and the media, who introduce children to prevailing social norms and moral codes (Grusec et al., 2013). According to Wikström (2020), whether someone has a tendency to criminality is highly dependent on their moral education and cognitive nurturing, which in turn is shaped by social norms (Buonanno, Montolio and Vanin, 2009; Lindström et al., 2018) and childhood experiences with main caregivers (Noddings, 2010; Mischel, 2014). As both moral education and cognitive nurturing are a manifestation of social capital, it stands to reason that lower social capital may result in low self-control and low adherence to moral standards among children born in that environment.

*Internalisation* occurs when social norms become deeply ingrained in an individual's belief system, transforming external expectations into personal moral standards. This process is encouraged by repeated exposure to and engagement with social norms. As individuals interact with their social environment, they begin to accept and adopt these norms as part of their own moral framework (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002).

*Conformity* is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Desire for social acceptance and fear of social rejection drive individuals to conform to social norms, which in turn shapes their moral behaviour. A well-established body of evidence supports the claim that people tend to abide by the moral norms of the group they belong to (Wellen, Hogg and Terry, 1998; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004). This is influenced by peer pressure and social identity (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002), and peer pressure can be a powerful motivator in aligning personal morality with group norms. Identifying with a particular social group and adopting its norms helps individuals maintain a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Hogg, 2016), and the moral codes of the group then become integral to the individual's identity (Stets and Carter, 2011). Conforming to social norms can, of course, have a negative impact on criminal behaviour, if the group to which an individual conforms is a gang, for example. As we explain in the following section, this can often be a symptom of low social capital (a lack of bonding and bridging ties) at community level, which influences individuals to seek a sense of belonging from alternative sources.

Finally, reinforcement mechanisms, including rewards and punishments, play a significant role in shaping morality in line with social norms (Kundu and Cummins, 2013). These may be introduced by a community, government, school, family and so on. Positive reinforcement encourages adherence to social norms by providing rewards or recognition, while negative reinforcement discourages deviant behaviour through sanctions or disapproval. This means that creating positive reinforcement mechanisms for acceptable moral standards can reduce the chance of crime occurring.

It is clear that these four factors that allow social norms to shape personal morality can be strong forces for reducing the chance of criminal behaviour when social capital is high. When a community is cohesive, with strong social bonds expecting and encouraging positive social norms, a person's moral code will be shaped accordingly.

### Mitigating the impact of trauma

A developing body of research links criminal offending (Ardino, 2012; DeHart et al., 2014; Zelechowski, 2016), reoffending (Dalsklev et al., 2019; Vitopoulos et al., 2019) and violence (Webb, 2004; Rich, 2009) to childhood trauma. This might be viewed as the inverse of morally positive socialisation - instances of neglect, abuse or violence that shapes an individual's brain in early life (Zhang et al., 2013; Rincón-Cortés and Sullivan, 2014). These changes can result in attachment disorders (Brisch, 2012), and impaired emotional regulation (Ehring and Quack, 2010), moral decision-making (Larsen et al., 2019) and self-control (Simmen-Janevska



et al., 2014). They can also be associated with lower interest in interpersonal relationships, and difficulty empathising with others (Flasbeck, Enzi and Brüne, 2017), potentially increasing individuals' propensity to commit crime.

Again, social capital has a strong role to play in mitigating this phenomenon. Higher social capital (that is, bonding and bridging ties that provide support and nurturing) reduces a person's chances of experiencing childhood mistreatment or neglect and developing trauma. Wikstrom et al. (2024) find an inverse correlation between close family relationships and crime propensity. Moreover, high social capital can also help to break the link between trauma and criminal behaviour, by providing support for those who have been traumatised. Research highlights various important factors, including social support and education (Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981), that can mediate the extent to which trauma impacts a person's propensity to commit crime in the longer term. This suggests higher social capital might also allow for more trauma-informed interventions for perpetrators to prevent re-offending.

## COMMUNITY

### Collective morality

Morality is not a purely individual trait. At the community level, social capital has a bearing on the moral codes and mechanisms of control within a community, and communities and their social capital shape and reinforce both individual morality and moral context. For example, Buonanno et al. (2009) found that social capital - a stronger feeling of belonging and links with others within the community - reduces crime by influencing public norms that affect the emotional components of morality. Specifically, they argue that social capital fosters feelings of guilt and shame about criminal behaviour, which raises the perceived cost of committing crimes and thus deters individuals from offending. As a result, social capital has been shown to be inversely correlated with homicide rates (Rosenfeld, Baumer and Messner, 2001), general crime rates (Akçomak and ter Weel, 2012), including property crime (Moore and Recker, 2016) and burglary (Martin, 2002). This reinforces the idea that stronger community ties resulting in stronger *collective morality* can contribute to lower instances of crime.

Conversely, people who live in areas with low social capital may not experience strong collective morality, and so may also be less likely to adhere to social norms and behaviour in their neighbourhoods and communities (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997). The resulting isolation is associated with poorer health outcomes, unmet needs and a feeling of alienation, which in turn makes people more likely to seek "alternative" communities among, for example, gang members or drug users. These groups can (through the conformity mechanism outlined above) encourage criminal behaviour.

On a larger scale, if more and more individuals begin to feel alienated from their communities and community morality, social disorganisation might occur (Braga and Clarke, 2014). This is when people feel they do not belong and become susceptible to engaging in criminal behaviour against their community, as their sense of alienation diminishes their sense of empathy and accountability (Sampson and Groves, 1989). It is for this reason that social capital is crucial not only in reducing crime, but also in preventing reoffending. Social capital fosters community connections and support networks that promote inclusion, reducing feelings of isolation, and helping individuals to feel more engaged and responsible within their communities. Without social capital, rehabilitation programmes are less likely to succeed.

## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE COMMUNITY

Data consistently shows that criminal behaviour follows predictable patterns tied more closely to geographic and societal factors than to individual traits (Curman, Andresen and Brantingham, 2015). Research by Wikström (2015) and Cohen et al. (2019) also shows that poorly maintained public spaces, lack of street lighting, and architectural designs that limit natural surveillance can also increase criminal activities.

In these areas, insufficient infrastructure—such as poorly maintained roads, inadequate street lighting, and lack of essential public services—undermines community safety and creates an environment where criminal activities are more likely to occur (Sherman, Gartin and Buerger, 1989). The prevalence of substandard housing, including dilapidated buildings and overcrowded living conditions, exacerbates physical and psychological distress among residents.

This draws from the school of Environmental Criminology, as discussed by Cohen and Felson (1979), which concentrates on routine activities and the physical and social layout of places as influences of criminality, advocating for situational crime prevention strategies.

However, adverse living conditions also contribute to social disorganisation and erode community cohesion (Morenoff, Sampson and Raudenbush, 2001). Poorly maintained public spaces, services and infrastructure often coincide with deprivation, and research shows a strong link between crime and deprivation (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Typically, crime is concentrated in areas with higher levels of poverty, poor infrastructure, limited economic opportunities, and substandard housing (Sherman, Gartin and Buerger, 1989).

The interaction between these factors (deprivation, environment, community cohesion) can create a vicious circle: crime is more likely to occur in communities that lack social cohesion, where weakened social bonds and trust among residents create an environment conducive to criminal activity. In such areas, the absence of community engagement leads to a breakdown in informal social controls which would usually regulate some forms of crime. In turn, these signs of disorder indicate and reinforce the perception of compromised social norms and weak institutions (O'Brien, Farrell and Welsh, 2019), further encouraging more crime. When community structures are weakened, and particularly when this is perceptible in the physical environment, crime rates increase.

The Chicago School of Sociology and Ecological Criminology, with notable contributions from scholars like Sampson et al. (1997), has explored this relationship further. Their findings emphasise the role of community structures, social cohesion, and collective efficacy in mitigating crime.

### What is "collective efficacy"?

Collective efficacy refers to the capacity of community members to regulate behaviour and maintain social order through mutual trust and shared expectations for intervening in support of neighbourhood norms (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). A lack of collective efficacy helps to explain why community characteristics such as poverty and high rates of residential turnover are linked to crime.

Collective efficacy tends to be stronger in areas with high social capital. Studies show that neighbourhoods with high levels of collective efficacy experience lower crime rates compared to those with weaker social ties (Sampson et al., 1997). Research by Wickes et al. (2013) corroborated these findings, indicating that collective efficacy mitigates the effects of social disorganisation by enhancing community resilience and social cohesion. The Chicago Neighbourhoods Project, a seminal study in this field, found that collective efficacy was a

stronger predictor of reduced violence than socioeconomic status or racial composition (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997).

Recent studies by Sampson et al. (2019) show that collective efficacy not only helps in managing crime but also mitigates the impact of adverse environmental conditions. As it can strengthen overall social fabric, it can contribute to enhanced quality of life and well-being among residents (Sampson, 2012; Wickes et al., 2013). Importantly, these studies suggest that communities with strong social networks and high levels of collective efficacy are better equipped to address crime and social issues, even in disadvantaged areas.

This highlights the importance of fostering social capital and building strong, interconnected communities as a strategy for preventing crime and improving public safety. By promoting mutual support, trust, and active participation among community members, it is possible to create a resilient social fabric that not only deters criminal behaviour but also encourages positive social interactions and communal well-being in the face of poverty and deprivation (Bursik and Grasmick, 2002).

Community-based interventions, such as the development of local crime prevention programmes and neighbourhood watch schemes, can play a crucial role in building collective efficacy. Programmes that engage residents in maintaining their environment and building social cohesion have been found to contribute significantly to crime reduction. For example, the “broken windows” approach advocated by Wilson and Kelling (2015) suggests that addressing minor signs of disorder, such as vandalism and litter, can prevent more serious crimes by promoting a sense of community care and vigilance. In addition, Cohen and Tita (1999) found that neighbourhoods with consistent efforts to address minor disorders, such as graffiti and vandalism, experience lower rates of violent crime.

## **THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN COMMUNITY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE INDIVIDUAL - A SITUATION-BASED APPROACH**

Wikström (2022) compared and evaluated the two schools of thought regarding crime - Environmental Criminology and the Social Ecology - outlined above. While Wikström acknowledged the value of both approaches, he pointed out that both schools often overlooked the significance of personal characteristics and experiences, as well as the critical role of person-environment interactions. He argues that a criminology that excludes the role of individuals is fundamentally flawed for several reasons:

*“1) People are the source of their actions (and intentional inactions). 2) Individuals are diverse and react differently to the same immediate environment. 3) The causes of actions are situational; people’s actions result from the person–environment interaction”* (Wikström, 2022, p. 183).

The research shows that a person’s local environment can play an important role along with their social networks in the possibility and opportunity to engage in criminal acts. Ignoring how individuals mentally process and respond to adverse environmental cues can therefore limit our understanding of how they contribute to crime. A comprehensive grasp of these mental processes is essential for identifying which environmental aspects are significant in explaining criminal behaviour (Wikström, 2022).

By integrating key knowledge and insights from both person-oriented and place-oriented criminology, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how and why crime occurs, and the role of social capital and networks within that process. Understanding the interplay of three factors – the individual, the community and the wider environment – in driving crime can help guide the development of effective policies and interventions to tackle it.

# POLICY GUIDELINES

This paper demonstrates that there is a relationship between different types of social capital and criminal activity. Social capital – the networks, relationships and trust within a community that enable individuals to work together for mutual benefit – can reduce crime in several ways. It can shape personal morality and self-control by strengthening social norms, but it can also work on a collective level, influencing the social atmosphere and mechanisms of regulation in communities. When communities have strong prosocial social networks, they maintain greater informal social control and intervene more effectively when they notice suspicious behaviour. These social networks are bolstered by local schools, local authorities and other institutions. When social norms support lawful behaviour, we generally see less criminality in an area.

Of course when people have greater access to economic and social opportunities, education and employment, they generally hold a more positive view of society, and a greater desire to participate in it rather than battle against it and damage their local environment. When measures focus on raising the profile and opportunities of marginalised groups, social isolation is decreased, and individuals are more likely to collaborate in creating better environments, leading to a virtuous cycle in building social capital.

Investing in social capital takes a concerted effort by policymakers to improve the welfare of people, their communities, and their status within those communities. This requires the input of councils, central government, social workers, community groups, educational institutions and more. However, evidence suggests doing so will decrease the incidence of crime and positively impact communities and the people who live in them, tackling the root causes of criminal behaviour.

The evidence presented here also suggests that policies designed to prevent crime should adopt a multidimensional approach. This means recognising that environmental design and collective efficacy both affect criminality, it is the interplay between these and a person's moral choices, made when faced with a specific situation, that truly influences whether someone will commit a crime.

Situational Action Theory (SAT), a framework developed in 2004 and further refined by Wikström, provides a useful guide to understand the interplay between these three (personal, environmental and situational) factors.

With this in mind, policymakers seeking to tackle crime ought to follow these general guidelines:

- 1. Adopt a multidimensional approach.** Policies should integrate insights from person-oriented, place-oriented, and situation-oriented evidence to address the complex nature of crime
- 2. Use Situational Action Theory (SAT).** Implement SAT to understand the interplay between individual predispositions, environmental influences, and situational factors.
- 3. Improve positive forms of social capital and networks.** Social capital has a crucial role to play in shaping individual and collective morality, and strengthening social cohesion and collective efficacy within communities to promote an environment where crime is not the norm, discouraged and the physical environment is preserved and respected. In this sense, social capital supports all three elements of a multi-dimensional approach to tackling crime (environment, community and individual/situational).
- 4. Improve environmental design.** Apply principles from Environmental Criminology to improve urban planning and infrastructure. Design public spaces and social infrastructure with a focus on effective lighting, rigorous maintenance, and thoughtful layout to reduce criminal opportunities. Additionally, strategic design elements like clear boundaries and well-defined communal areas could be used not only to discourage illicit activities, but to promote community activities and boost social cohesion.
- 5. Provide support for at-risk individuals.** Develop programmes that provide continuous support for children from abusive or high-risk environments, including mentoring, after-school programmes, and family support services. Offer programmes that support people who experience victimisation, for example domestic violence support groups and safe places where women can access help and advice. Importantly, integrate social capital-building strategies with mental health services, ensuring that individuals not only receive psychological support but also gain access to supportive social networks free of stigma.
- 6. Support offender rehabilitation.** Provide access to services that address unresolved childhood trauma and promote the development of secure attachments. This will allow offenders to employ more adaptive models of relating to others and increase the likelihood of them engaging in positive social capital by adapting prosocial norms.
- 7. Collaborate with stakeholders.** Enlist academic experts, charities, community groups, and relevant organisations in policy development. By collaborating with these stakeholders, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the underlying causes of local crime patterns and identify effective, community-driven solutions. This collaborative approach ensures that interventions are tailored to the specific needs of the community and that they leverage the expertise of those directly involved in addressing social issues. Implementing such systemic responses not only enhances the effectiveness of crime prevention, but also improves community efficacy.
- 8. Focus on education and morality.** Invest in educational programmes that promote morality, self-control, and shared community values, fostering mutual respect and understanding among community members. These initiatives help individuals align with pro-social norms, build stronger relationships within the community, and reduce the propensity for crime. By encouraging collaboration and empathy, such programmes foster social capital in an environment where individuals feel connected and invested in one another's well-being.
- 9. Use data-driven decision making.** Use data and research to identify crime patterns and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Regularly update policies based on the latest evidence to ensure they remain relevant and effective.

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PUBLISHED BY DEMOS FEBRUARY 2025

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