

DEMOS

SOCIAL CAPITAL 2025

A PROTECTIVE SHIELD FOR
CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND
COMMUNITIES

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national network
for neighbourhood
improvement

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Adam Coutts and Diego Mauricio Diaz Velásquez

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, written by the academics Adam Coutts (University of Cambridge) and Diego Mauricio Diaz Velásquez (Fundación Universitaria San Martín, Columbia), examines the evidence that social capital acts as a protective shield for children, families and communities under stress. It makes the case that the state should increase activities that strengthen social capital and networks to support families to stay safely together. It is the second 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 DANIEL CROWE



Where we live, who we live with, and our relationship with our neighbourhoods play a major role in how our lives unfold. From health and welfare outcomes to access to education and employment opportunities, the places we are born, are brought up and live in are key to determining whether we achieve our potential. Life is a postcode lottery.

Research for Local Trust and 3ni shows that in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, that also have low levels of social infrastructure, children have worse outcomes than equally deprived but better-connected areas. Social infrastructure – places and spaces for people to meet; groups and networks that bring people together; and levels of transport and digital connectivity – helps social capital form.

We partnered with Demos and Local Trust to produce this series of papers on social capital to help focus attention on why it is such an important concept with real world significance. The series was inspired by 3ni's work supporting local authorities to develop a new long-term approach to building community capacity, social infrastructure and social capital in the most deprived neighbourhoods - those with multi-generational, entrenched and chronic problems.

This paper explores research with something to say on the link between social capital and outcomes for children. It suggests that strong social capital helps keep kids out of care. This must surely be a priority if we consider the misery the separation of children from their families often causes and the poor outcomes for children in care. The argument is that we need to encourage local civic activity, strong social networks and norms that enable families and communities to thrive. Some local authorities are pioneering this approach and we are supporting them in this work. There has been much discussion about the importance of national renewal. Ensuring we do right by our children is perhaps the best place to start.

Daniel Crowe, Director, 3ni

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, there were roughly 107,000 children in the care of local authorities in the UK. Over the last five years that number has grown by 8% (NSPCC, 2024). The circumstances under which a child might be taken into care vary. It could be a family health crisis, or factors that reduce parents' ability to parent: domestic violence, poor mental health, or substance misuse. But there are hidden underlying factors behind these symptoms, such as poverty and social isolation. The solutions are equally wide-ranging and deep rooted. To keep families together takes safe streets, affordable childcare, good mental health provision, access to job opportunities and more. Core to these is social capital: the community groups, resources and support networks available to people through their friends, family, colleagues and neighbours.

This paper explores the research on social capital and its impact on individual and community well-being. It specifically examines how social capital may influence the numbers of children in care, the incidence of child abuse, domestic violence, adolescent crime, and the impact on the mental health of children.

Social capital – which is made up of networks that promote trust and co-operation – can support children's development. Most of us are familiar with the adage that 'it takes a village' to raise a child – that children benefit from attentive family members, teachers, neighbours and the wider community. But less attention is paid to the support networks available to their parents and caregivers. This is a mistake. These are 'linked lives' as academics frame it: to support a child is to support the people around them. It might be material help through a cash loan from a friend or the offer of free babysitting. It might be less tangible – emotional support, or mutual trust between neighbours such as picking up an Amazon delivery.

The link between social capital and parenting tends to be overlooked for a benign reason. We assume, rightly, that parents want the best for their child, and will go out of their way to raise them in a community with strong social bonds – places with good schools, helpful neighbours, music classes, sports clubs and so on. But this assumption masks a pernicious, structural barrier to social capital. People do not raise children in situations of their own choosing. Geographic inequality in the UK means that people's circumstances – including their access to social capital, such as networks and resources – can be very different. Parents are constrained by the social and cultural life of their area, their ability (or inability) to move to a place with thriving local networks and whether they can financially afford to participate in activities and events. The reality is that some parents may not have the mental or financial bandwidth to ferry their children around to activities when they have to work two jobs, have mental health issues and constantly worry about paying the bills.

This paper argues that children are more likely to thrive where social capital consists of supportive networks that enable children to flourish and develop. And when they do face difficult circumstances these networks help them to cope and get by. The research cited in this report links these positive forms of social capital to lower rates of child abuse, fewer cases of domestic violence, less adolescent crime and better mental health for both children and parents. For example: in the US, Zolotor and Runyan (2006) find that a 1% increase in

community engagement – characterised by greater integration into community networks and trusting relationships – was linked to a 30% decrease in the likelihood of parental violence towards children.

The evidence points in one direction: that strengthening positive forms of social capital and networks will help bolster communities, families and result in safer homes for children. A point of contention tends to be the mechanism by which progress is achieved. With limited time and money, should policymakers focus on schools, parenting, crime, mental health, or something else entirely? This paper sets out the evidence to help prioritise and focus resources. From our review of the literature we have identified four mechanisms that can strengthen social capital:

- 1. Community meetings.** Local gatherings are a vital platform for sharing resources and advice, and can foster a sense of solidarity and support.
- 2. Advocacy.** Mobilising around specific community issues such as financial hardship or childcare can establish tightly-knit local networks.
- 3. Routine activities and organisations in neighbourhoods and communities,** child care groups, sports, dance or music clubs as well as fundraising are essential for building social networks. They have unanticipated gains and are low cost. Extracurricular school activities, in particular provide safe breathing spaces, that can help students overcome challenges at home.
- 4. Positive family interactions.** A foundation of social capital lies within the family and close relatives. Respectful, supportive, and understanding family relationships also encourage good relationships with peers, enhancing the overall social fabric within neighbourhoods.

Across all of these, one thing is consistent: trust is a prerequisite for developing strong social fabric in communities. If people feel it is unsafe to take part in local meetings, or are suspicious of harm or scams, there is likely to be little social capital in an area. A high level of trust is the difference between a community where people have repeated and focused interactions around shared concerns, and a community where social unity is fractured, which can lead to increased crime and violence.

Families, neighbourhoods and schools are on the frontline of building this trust. Schools, in particular, can provide a refuge for thousands of children in the UK with chaotic domestic lives. It is vital to invest in schools not only because they provide the physical premises for a safe learning environment and are the principal location where children meet, but to ensure teachers can be positive role models and offer leadership. They are on the frontline, able to spot when a child is experiencing difficulties at home.

Local authorities should also prioritise places where community members can safely discuss family issues outside the home, such as community hubs, shopping centres, parks, or primary care clinics. Lastly, policymakers should explore ways to promote various micro-scale cultural, social and charitable events to foster integration, such as community meals and sports, arts and cultural activities including music shows and children's sports in the evenings and weekends.

Councils, central government, employers, teachers and community groups all have a role to play in creating the right conditions for social capital to develop. This paper surveys the evidence they need to get started in building it.

For a full discussion of what social capital is and how it manifests, see the separate briefing paper in this series: *What is social capital?*

THE EVIDENCE LANDSCAPE SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SAFER FAMILIES

In this section we provide an overview of the international research examining the links between social capital and key social outcomes: the numbers of children in care, child abuse, domestic violence, rates of adolescent crime, and mental health. To conduct this review within a limited timeframe, the search was restricted to studies listed in the Scopus database, which indexes scientific research across both the social and natural sciences. We included only studies in the English language. This highlighted a lack of reliable evidence examining our particular research question in the UK context so we looked further afield.

CHILDREN IN CARE AND CHILD ABUSE

The evidence indicates that social capital plays a role in the number of children in care. There are a number of research papers available, ranging from reviews of interventions designed to improve community social capital and reduce the numbers of children in care, to studies of levels of social capital and their impact on childcare or abuse. This section will first outline the implications of social capital for childcare and then what the literature tells us about its effect on child abuse.

Kysar-Monon (2023), working in the US context, examines how social capital at the family level affects childcare, particularly regarding external behavioural problems (e.g. violence, shouting or delinquency). The study reports that significant childhood adversity such as low income, low community support, high residential instability, and physical and verbal maltreatment from family members and neighbours can exacerbate inadequate childcare and increase behavioural problems. In contrast, families endowed with robust social capital – evidenced by the availability of family members for children to confide in, the time family members dedicate to children,

and the level of support they provide – tend to enhance childcare dynamics and improve behavioural outcomes, shifting from rudeness to caring.

Unfortunately, the study does not evaluate community relationships or networks beyond the family unit, and how social capital might affect behaviour in this wider context. Nevertheless it provides crucial insights into just how important social capital is for family life.

In Japan, Funakoshi and colleagues (2020) also study the link between social capital and behavioural problems in children. They find that both a lack of community-level and individual-level social capital are linked to things like aggression, mood swings, hyperactivity, anxiety, anti-social conduct, and difficulty paying attention among children. Individual-level parental social capital was found to reduce difficult behaviours. Funakoshi et al propose that supporting caregivers and strengthening social ties within the broader community enhance children's wellbeing.

Mayer et al. (2023), also working in the US, show that a high density of non-profit organisations in a community can lead to better outcomes for children, such as better child protection and the proper implementation of care practices. The presence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can help in a number of ways, such as by providing resources, storing information, sharing childcare expertise, or providing a safe place for people to meet. The study finds that communities with both higher social capital and a higher density of NGOs have lower rates of child maltreatment. However, it lacks a comparative analysis between areas with a significant NGO presence and those without, and so fails to demonstrate causation. Additionally, the research does not explore whether the type of non-profit organisation is significant. The central point remains: social capital is a strong determinant of child maltreatment rates, and non-profits can help to build social capital at the neighbourhood level.

Maggi et al. (2011), studying communities in British Columbia, demonstrate the impact of social capital on the quality of childcare provided at care centres. The authors highlight that communities with lower social disorganisation (characterised by less crime and higher income levels) and the presence of active citizen coalitions overseeing childcare activities, are likely to provide exceptional care to children. While the study clearly explains the benefits of these groups, it doesn't fully explain why some communities are better at forming them than others. Further research is needed to understand what makes people decide to form these coalitions in the first place, and why they succeed.

Educational attainment also serves as a crucial indicator of the quality of childcare (Chetty et al., 2015; McClung & Gayle, 2013). Research suggests that higher educational achievements are a strong sign of effective childcare underpinned by positive social capital (McClung & Gayle, 2013; Chetty et al., 2015). For instance, Chetty and colleagues (2015) demonstrate that providing families with vouchers to move to less deprived neighbourhoods significantly boosts children's university and college outcomes, particularly if the move occurs before the age of 13.

Conversely, looked-after children often experience lower educational attainment, which is indicative of limited social capital (McClung & Gayle, 2013). Low education attainment often stems from unstable care environments and a lack of supportive relationships, which are critical for fostering educational success and broader personal development. Children who do badly at school typically lack stable, nurturing figures who support their academic efforts and celebrate their achievements. This is especially true in residential care, or for children from troubled homes, who can feel isolated and lack self-esteem. Such circumstances not only impede the educational progress of children but also erode their social capital, restricting their ability to build beneficial networks and set ambitious personal goals.

Concerning child abuse, research in the United States has explored how social capital affects the likelihood of parental abuse (Zolotor & Runyan, 2006). The study found that parents experiencing significant social isolation tend to be more abusive, and more likely to display intimidating, harsh, or violent behaviours. Notably, there is a strong inverse relationship between social capital and abusive behaviour. A 1% increase in community engagement – characterised by greater integration into community networks and fostering collaborative and trusting relationships – was linked to a 30% decrease in the likelihood of parental violence.

In exploring how social capital can help children to overcome trauma as a result of abuse, a study in Japan (Isumi et al., 2023) highlights the pivotal role of schools. Schools are environments in which children can build social capital through interactions with peers and teachers. When students form trustworthy relationships at school, it fosters a sense of belonging and a belief that they have reliable support when facing challenges. This is equally true in their relationships with teachers; co-operation and respect between students and teachers, particularly when teachers show genuine care, can support students. This support not only offers a positive role model but can also reshape how students view themselves and their future. Thus schools act as 'social capital laboratories', creating protective factors that can shield children from poor family environments or help them recover from past abuse.

In Adachi City, on the north side of Tokyo, Nawa and colleagues (2018) find that low community-level social capital is linked to physical abuse of children. The researchers studied a questionnaire given to the parents and caregivers of elementary school children, aged 6-7 years old. A similar piece of work was undertaken by Fujiwara and colleagues (2016) in Japan with a population-based sample of women with 4-month-old infants. In both cases, the researchers found that when people in a neighbourhood trust each other and have strong social connections, there are fewer cases of infant abuse. To reduce the risk of physical child abuse, policy interventions should seek to both grow the social networks of isolated mothers and strengthen the social bonds of their wider community.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Research in the US with Vietnamese migrants highlights how elements of social capital in a community help women cope and recover from domestic violence (Bui & Morash, 2007). The study found that the social networks women formed at places like church and work can enable them to seek formal assistance from government agencies to prevent escalating violence or restrain their aggressors. Women are more comfortable initially discussing their issues with friends, coworkers, or social workers who were familiar with their native language and who work at the community primary health clinic rather than going immediately to formal authorities. However, several barriers were identified which may prevent these women from seeking help from the authorities including: language barriers, as many have poor English, and dependence on their partners for financial support, transportation. Although the study focused only on a single immigrant community, it sheds light on the complex dynamic of how places and institutions outside the home can impact on how women in particular access support when experiencing domestic violence.

Menon and colleagues (2020) investigate how various elements of social capital help women in India to resist and overcome partner violence. Like the situation of Vietnamese women in the US, the study highlights that with the support of a non-profit organisation, women are able to form community networks. These networks serve as platforms for discussing challenges and devising community-based solutions to end the violence they face. Increased participation in these networks helps women build and strengthen social ties, especially with others who face similar issues in their communities. This collaborative effort is aimed at fostering a sense of collective efficacy, with the primary goal of reducing violence. However, the study does

not delve into whether the involvement of non-profits is a decisive factor in catalysing the necessary social capital to halt aggression, or if similar initiatives could emerge organically at the grassroots level.

Johnson et al. (2024) explore how social capital can mediate or mitigate domestic economic violence, which includes activities like employment sabotage, coerced debt, and credit damage that restrict a partner's access to economic resources. The study reveals that social networks – among friends, families or communities – play a crucial role in countering this type of violence. These networks often provide crucial economic resources during emergencies, or can offer housing for women seeking to leave violent situations or assist with childcare. However, a significant challenge remains as these networks may not consistently offer financial support due to their own limited resources. Beyond social capital, human capital elements, such as financial literacy inherited from one's family, prove invaluable. This form of literacy equips women to better manage these challenges.

Overall, elements of social capital – active engagement and the building of networks, community trust and cohesion – can help women to mitigate or eradicate domestic violence. These networks offer significant support to women as they can be heard, listened to by others and connect with organisations and people that can provide assistance.

ADOLESCENT CRIME

The earliest studies about the role of social capital and adolescents engaging in criminal activity (and its overall impact on community violence) were conducted in Chicago by Sampson and colleagues (1997). They explore how social elements in neighbourhoods can foster or hinder peace across communities. This pioneering research reveals that significant economic deprivation as well as neighbourhood instability (i.e. high residential turnover and growing numbers of people living in rented accommodation) prevents citizens from establishing self-sustaining networks with common goals to benefit the entire community. Sampson and colleagues (2006) found that higher levels of deprivation led to increased isolation among residents, reducing their involvement in community activities that build trust and co-operative relationships. These relationships are crucial for addressing communal issues, including the reporting and prevention of crime and violence. For individuals in neighbourhoods, it is necessary to establish relationships which could lead to what Sampson and colleagues (2006) term 'collective efficacy'.

Collective efficacy is defined as "the process of activating or converting social ties among residents in a neighbourhood in order to achieve collective goals, such as public order or the control of crime. It is a measure of shared expectations for social control and social cohesion and trust among residents" (Sampson et al., 2006). A lack of collective efficacy helps to explain why community characteristics such as poverty and high rates of residential turnover are linked to crime. Neighbourhood collective efficacy has also been shown to play a critical role in children's mental health and psychosocial development (Ichikawa, Fujiwara, & Kawachi, 2017).

Strong social ties help to reduce crime in a number of ways. The pathways are:

- 1. Informal social control:** the ability of adults – not just parents – to intervene when an adolescent is seen to be taking part in anti-social activities;
- 2. Positive role models:** mentors and authority figures who shape children’s aspirations and strengthen their sense of belonging;
- 3. Widely-shared information:** access to things like job opportunities, referral to services, etc.
- 4. Collective efficacy:** to preserve social order the ability of locals to undertake collective action e.g. residents working together to clean up after floods or another natural disaster.

Literature reviews on the link between social capital and crime typically focus on understanding how social capital can mitigate (or exacerbate) community violence and influence adolescent involvement in criminal activities (McPherson et al., 2014; Vyncke et al., 2013). These studies consistently find that strong social cohesion and active community participation significantly reduce adolescent criminal activity and violence. The findings indicate that individuals from less deprived backgrounds are more likely to benefit from wider social networks, as participation in community activities gives them access to shared resources. Young people are also influenced by the social capital of their parents. Higher-income families benefit from broader, higher-quality community networks, which ultimately give young people better integration opportunities and access to better resources, such as well-maintained sports facilities. This environment promotes respectful behaviour and reduces criminal tendencies.

A study in Honduras (Hansen-Nord et al., 2014) echoes findings by Sampson and colleagues (1997) in Chicago, showing that low levels of social capital and collective efficacy can lead adolescents to engage in violence. The study specifically highlights how low cognitive social capital, notably a lack of trust among neighbours, impedes the development of supportive community relationships, thereby pushing adolescents towards violence. The researchers observed that in Honduras, where gang conflict is common, people often trust each other less and prioritise self-protection. This pervasive mistrust undermines the community cohesion necessary for mutual support and collaboration – which, in turn, are vital for reducing violence and deterring adolescents from adopting violent behaviours.

A lack of trust significantly impacts the quality and integrity of social capital, a problem not exclusive to Honduras. Countries like Colombia and Guatemala, which have been marred by extensive political and cultural violence, have evidenced similar phenomena (McIlwaine & Moser, 2001). In an extensive interview programme, McIlwaine and Moser found that armed conflicts in these countries have essentially dismantled social capital, making violence pervasive and leading adolescents to engage in delinquent activities. Trust builds social capital, fostering relationships that can provide significant support. But in conflict-ridden settings, fear, rather than trust, becomes the dominant force, leading to individualism and eroding the social fabric. This disruption results in communities lacking unity around common goals or objectives that could motivate collective efforts to improve livelihoods or stop young people taking part in crime. Without a protective community to help them, adolescents have strong incentives to join criminal groups, especially if facing significant domestic violence. For some teenagers, criminal gangs are perceived as safe havens, offering the protection they lack at home. However, this association often leads them to project their violent experiences onto the community, perpetuating cycles of violence and fear.

Schools and educational settings have a vital role to play. Researchers in China (Svalina et al., 2023) find that social capital within schools plays a critical role in developing pro-social behaviour in adolescents. ‘School social capital’ includes the ability of children to build trusting

and supportive relationships with their classmates and teachers. These types of relationships can deter adolescents from engaging in risky sexual activity or crimes and can even improve mental health.

Boeck et al. (2006) find similar results in the UK. Their work underscores the importance of social networks at home, within the community and school in preventing children from engaging in criminal activities. The researchers particularly emphasise the critical role of networks built in school settings, arguing that schools are crucial for children and adolescents to establish extensive social networks, which can mitigate risk-prone behaviours and violence. The study suggests that a broad network not only provides substantial resources that aid adolescents in decision-making but also creates a robust social structure that can monitor and influence adolescents' actions and behaviours effectively. The study also notes that adolescents who eventually engage in criminal activity often lack hope and do not see how their actions could potentially improve their prospects.

PULLING THE DIFFERENT THREADS TOGETHER

Each of these studies highlights the critical role of social capital in children's lives. Social capital helps us build collaborative, cohesive networks and relationships within families and communities. These bonds, in turn, help people resolve shared problems and achieve personal goals, improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities. This type of social capital, which can be described as 'positive' social capital, can significantly mitigate issues such as depression, low self-esteem, substance misuse, and crime. It has been linked time and again to improved education and childcare, better-organised neighbourhoods with clean and well-maintained environments.

But social capital is not always positive. Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi (2017) explore the 'dark side' of social capital. This can involve excessive demands being put on people, for example, or the use of social bonds and conformity to exclude others. It is also part of criminal activity, through the connectedness of gangs and mafia groups who mimic the role of parental engagement. Participation in gangs offers stability but is related to abuse, and negative educational and social outcomes, as well as physical and mental health issues among children (McClung & Gayle, 2013; Sørensen & Hansen, 2023; Zolotor & Runyan, 2006). Communities with this type of negative bonding social capital, have higher crime and severe mental health issues, including depression among residents – particularly children (Chum et al., 2019; Sampson et al., 1997).

Conversely, positive social capital is built on respectful interactions within families and communities. It leads to positive outcomes, such as well-organised community efforts to ensure childcare services can protect children's rights and foster their development in a safe and respectful environment (Maggi et al., 2011). Additionally, robust social networks provide refuge for women facing domestic abuse and serve as conduits to resources from authorities or organisations to ensure their safety (Menon & Allen, 2020).

In educational settings, supportive social networks help children who have suffered parental abuse to overcome psychological impacts (Isumi et al., 2023; McClung & Gayle, 2013; Svalina et al., 2023). Genuine community investment in collective wellbeing prevents predatory or violent activities, particularly those targeting young people (Boeck et al., 2006). Effective social networks consistently monitor and address community safety issues, mobilise government services when necessary, and discourage negative behaviours and criminal activities among young people by demonstrating the benefits of accessing community resources and support.

It is crucial that policymakers understand that social capital plays a significant role in the development of community wellbeing, and that this in turn has profound effects for families and children. Research consistently shows that social capital is a determining factor in enhancing both individual and community welfare. Policy makers should also be aware that there are numerous definitions of social capital. This creates a dilemma when determining which elements are crucial for policy interventions: with limited time and money, where should resources be focused? Are family relationships more important than those within the community, or schools? Should we invest in health centres, or domestic violence shelters? And who defines success? All these scenarios create decisions for policymakers seeking to strengthen social capital, making the task appear daunting and complex. Change also takes time. Investing in certain areas without achieving sufficient positive social outcomes can feel like a waste of scarce public money, discouraging further investment in efforts to enhance or develop social capital. Policymakers therefore need clarity about what social capital is, and how it emerges and is sustained, in order to facilitate decision-making and prioritise the actions to be taken.

POLICY OPTIONS

The goal of this paper is to help reduce poor outcomes for children. As we've seen, social capital is a factor in achieving this outcome. But for policymakers, there is still a debate: how, exactly to support positive change, particularly for the most deprived communities.

Social capital can form and be sustained in deprived neighbourhoods, thus supporting collective efficacy and encouraging economic stability. It can be encouraged by creating the right conditions.

A poor physical environment and a lack of basic services and facilities can lead to significant mental distress among residents, fostering disengagement from communal efforts. People need homes with working utilities, transport links, a basic level of services like rubbish collection, and so on – which can be provided by the public sector in a 'top down' way (Akçomak & Ter Weel, 2012; Sampson et al., 1997). The quality of housing is a particularly important factor: affordable homes with adequate heating and access to local amenities create more stable tenancies, allowing communities to forge stronger and more enduring relationships.

But you do not need to live in an economically vibrant area before you can create social capital. In fact, the opposite is true: social capital is a catalyst for economic development. History teaches us that change can be even more effective – and longer lasting – when it is 'bottom up' and led by residents themselves (Local Trust, 2023).

Encouraging nascent social capital can therefore happen at a neighbourhood level, even where there is a high degree of economic deprivation, when local volunteers come together with councils, charities, sports clubs or neighbourhood groups to advocate for themselves, and make sure the public sector is taking their needs into account.

For anyone interested in developing social capital, then – be they policymakers, local residents, community organisers, or non-profit groups – several consistent mechanisms for change can be identified across the scholarly literature:

- 1. Community meetings and gatherings.** These are vital for building trust and reciprocity within communities. For example, Menon and Allen (2020) find that in India, women use community meetings facilitated by NGOs to discuss and address domestic violence. These gatherings not only provide a platform for sharing resources and advice but also foster a sense of solidarity and support. Researchers also note that civic groups created for one purpose can later be 'appropriated' to serve another, becoming part of the general stock of social capital in an area. Coleman (1990) refers to these associations as 'appropriable social organisations' – for example, a church group or residents association designed for informal socialising might later be re-purposed to organise protests against the closure of a local hospital. The evidence we have surveyed also makes a case for exploiting the protective factor of schools that can help create community bonds. We need to identify what already exists in local communities and build on these networks.
- 2. Advocacy and mobilisation.** Advocating for specific community issues mobilises people to form effective networks. Maggi et al. (2011) describe how communities with a vested interest in providing optimal childcare come together to form active, well-organised coalitions. These groups, and highly cohesive networks, ensure that childcare activities comply with government guidelines and effectively use available resources to enhance the care provided for children.
- 3. Extracurricular and cultural activities.** These activities are essential for building new networks, especially among young people. Isumi (2023) and Svalina (2023) highlight how school-based extracurricular activities in Japan and China help students overcome challenges such as depression stemming from abuse or neglect, by fostering trust and support among peers and teachers. These events and social interactions allow participants to connect personally, understand each other's interests and challenges, and foster cohesive social networks. By motivating community members to collaborate, they can also improve the overall community atmosphere. In the Netherlands, community-driven initiatives such as fundraisers for shelters or food provision effectively bring people together (Akçomak & Ter Weel, 2012). These activities not only facilitate sharing and a deeper understanding of community challenges but also foster coalitions and networks committed to alleviating social problems.
- 4. Positive family interactions.** Families are the foundation of strong social capital. Positive interactions within families, characterised by respect, support, and open communication, significantly influence the broader social networks that children and young people engage with. This is crucial in preventing negative outcomes like criminal behaviour or poor educational attainment (McClung & Gayle, 2013; McIlwaine & Moser, 2001). Furthermore, the importance of positive family interactions is highlighted as a foundational element of social capital (McClung & Gayle, 2013; McIlwaine & Moser, 2001; Sørensen & Hansen, 2023). Respectful, supportive, and understanding dynamics between parents and children encourage similar constructive relationships with peers, enhancing the overall social fabric and networks within neighbourhoods.

Policymakers should consider measures to facilitate the activation of these mechanisms. They can significantly affect both individual and community welfare by fostering trust, leading to increased community interaction and promoting wellbeing. At the individual level, such measures can boost self-confidence and morale, potentially reducing depression, which in turn may encourage people to engage more with community members, share their resources, and address communal problems. These measures can also create confidence among community members, encouraging them to integrate more with each other, as they feel confident that when joining in a meeting or gathering, they will be safe from harm or scams.

Across all the evidence reviewed in this report, trust, solidarity, and cohesion are recognised as critical components of social capital. It could be argued that *trust* serves as both a prerequisite for and an outcome of social capital (McClung & Gayle, 2013). At its core, trust involves feeling safe to participate in meetings. Over time, this foundational trust is reinforced with continuous interactions – through sharing ideas, resources, and goals – which build confidence among collaborators. On the other hand, solidarity and cohesion are primarily the products of these mechanisms, leading to effective community engagement through repeated and focused interactions on shared concerns, thereby strengthening the social fabric. The absence of this foundational trust and the mechanisms that foster collaboration and cohesion can fracture social unity, escalating crime and violence, and perpetuating fear within communities.

Families, neighbourhoods and schools are key components in building positive and enduring social networks and social capital. They are at the frontline of identifying those children most-at-risk. Schools provide a refuge from chaotic domestic family circumstances for thousands of children in the UK. It is vital to invest in schools not only because they provide physical premises where children meet, but to also recognise the role of teachers who can provide role models and leadership. Similarly, extracurricular activities that can foster exchange between fellow classmates through sports or civic activities are essential.

To improve family relationships, local authorities should start by focusing on providing a stable neighbourhood environment. This may provide more opportunities for families to interact, understand each other's challenges, and work together on social issues – to help each other get by. Facilitating access to centres where community members can discuss family issues, such as community hubs, shopping centres, parks, or GPs surgeries can also help. These initiatives promote decent and respectful interactions among family members, which can then ripple out to strengthen communal social capital.

Lastly, policymakers should explore ways to promote various micro-level cultural, social and charitable events to foster integration. These events can provide opportunities for individuals to discuss issues that affect their daily lives or celebrate the positive aspects of their communities which in turn enhances personal and community wellbeing.

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