MINI-REVIEW: WELLNESS INDICATOR – SOCIAL CAPACITY

Prepared for MaRS Discovery District

Prepared by the Centre for Health Communities
School of Public Health, University of Alberta

- OVERVIEW -

Social capacity is an important facet of urban community wellness. While definitions of social capacity are varied, social capacity has a number of common dimensions including **community connectedness**, **community leadership**, **diversity and inclusion**, and **citizen engagement**[1,2]. Included in this mini-review is a brief summary of the academic literature (including, where appropriate, grey literature identified through the search of academic sources) that reported on interventions, services, community initiatives, and policies in relation to social capacity. We also highlighted the possible impact on very vulnerable populations (VVP) as appropriate.

As requested by MaRS Discovery District, the scope of the review was limited to literature reporting on interventions (services, etc.) that: assessed or evaluated (qualitatively and/or quantitatively); focused on inner city/urban communities (i.e., excluding rural and suburban) in high-income countries; and were published in the previous 10 years (or key papers outside that time period) in English. As such, the aim of this review is to provide a broad environmental scan rather than an in-depth assessment of the literature as described. As requested, we also assessed the aforementioned literature according to five political factors: **duration of intervention/assessment** (i.e., long-term or short-term); **governance and conflict resolution models**; **data-sharing processes**; **service delivery models** (i.e., centralized or dispersed); and **integration of a systems-level approach**.

- FINDINGS -

COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

Community connectedness refers to the degree that community members feel they are able to engage and participate in their community overall[3]. Examples of interventions to address community connectedness in inner city contexts include community gardening and neighbourhood beautification initiatives[4–8], co-housing programs[9], mixed-income housing redevelopments[10,11], and initiatives and policies to improve the built environment (e.g., walkability and mixed land use zoning)[12]. Volunteering in community gardens was a common neighbourhood-level initiative found to increase community connectedness among recent immigrants, older adults, and community members living in areas with high social deprivation[4–8]. Research on participation in community gardens has found mixed impacts. While some studies reported an increase in social networks, development of new skills, and provision of an inclusive space for people to come together, in addition to other physical activity and nutritional benefits[5–7], other studies found that some participants reported no impact on their health[13]. Also, community gardens have been criticized for unintentionally supporting policies that reduce government social supports[7,14]. Similarly, co-housing and mixed-income housing developments have demonstrated varied impacts. While co-housing developments, (i.e., autonomous units with shared spaces such as kitchens, dining halls, meeting rooms) have been found to increase community connectedness by encouraging residents to interact, care, and socialize together[9]; mixed-income redevelopments have had negative consequences on building social connectedness (i.e., geographic mobility may not translate into opportunities for socio-economic progress and connection[10,11]).
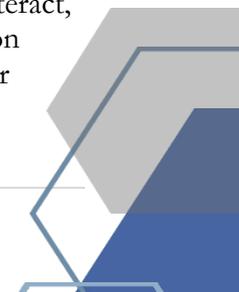
COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Strategies to build **community leadership** have typically engaged low-income and at-risk youth to become change agents in their own communities through after-school and summer programs[15–18]. These initiatives have often followed a community-based research model whereby youth identify issues in their community that are important to them (e.g., risky teen sex, gun violence, and homelessness) and take action on these issues through empowerment and skill-building activities[15,17]. Similarly, other initiatives have specifically been developed to build community leadership among neighbours living in diverse communities[19,20] and among recent university graduates[21] using a community-asset model. These multi-week training initiatives focused on building different leadership skills and offered mini-seed grants for community leaders to operationalize their projects to build vibrant communities[21]. Other community leadership strategies have included building leadership capacity of community health workers through advocacy, community organising, research, and evaluation training to connect and engage other community members[22].

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Initiatives to promote **diversity and inclusion** have focused on a variety of strategies targeting different VVP groups. For example, social enterprise interventions (i.e., businesses with primarily social objectives) have been implemented to engage vulnerably housed youth in vocational training, and improve access to mental health services[23,24]. Social enterprise interventions have enhanced social support and pro-social behaviours[24]. Other types of diversity and inclusion strategies have focused on addressing racism and social exclusion through social campaigns (e.g., public advertising) and have been had a meaningful effect in terms of stimulating public discourse[25]. Sport and recreation based interventions were also a common strategy to promote diversity and inclusion[26–28]. For instance, some interventions have engaged hard-to-reach urban youth through sport combined with job training and educational connections to improve social connectedness and upward social mobility[26]. Other interventions have focused on the impact of coaches on youth, in particular coaches that reflect the same gender and/or race of the young players[27]. These interventions have provided social capital building benefits including guidance, information, and encouragement to inner city youth[27]. Group based yoga has also improved diversity and inclusion in inner cities by reducing social isolation and increasing inclusion among low-income pregnant adolescents[28].

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Citizen engagement is the meaningful involvement of individuals in policy or program development[29]. "Intersection repair" is one type of citizen engagement strategy that builds social capital by engaging community members in asset mapping, planning for action, and acting on projects of interest to the group[30]. Common projects under an intersection repair framework included beautification projects such as painting murals or landscaping parking strips[30]. These projects have encouraged people from different backgrounds and experiences to come together and overcome differences[30]. Peer support was another common program to promote citizen engagement[31–33]. Recognizing that civic engagement is the crux of sustainable communities[30], poverty and social exclusion negatively impact the ways VVP participate in social, economic, cultural, and political life, including their relationships with others[34].

DURATION

In terms of the **duration** of social capacity focused interventions, the majority of initiatives included in the reviewed literature were short-term. For instance, many of the youth-focused capacity building initiatives took place and were evaluated over the length of the school year (~10 months) or the summer break (~2 months)[15–17,21,27]. While these types of interventions were shorter in length, the intention was that there would be longer-term ripple effects—although, these longer-term impacts have not yet been documented in the literature. Other interventions, such as community gardens[4,6,35] or neighbourhood revitalization interventions tended to be longer in length[10,11].

GOVERNANCE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The most commonly used **governance and conflict resolution model** to build social capacity for urban wellbeing were rooted in community-based approaches. These community models can take a variety of forms including community-based research approaches[8,15–18,24]. Typically, these approaches bridge research and practice for action by involving members of the community across all stages of the research, from selecting the questions to taking action based on the findings. Other social capacity interventions took a more formal community partnership approach connecting community and government stakeholders[6]. Community-engaged approaches were important for honouring the voices of marginalized groups and developing interventions, policies and programs that resonate with the lived-experience of VVP[16]. Conversely, interventions that did not meaningfully engage community members experienced later conflicts because community members lacked confidence in the ability of community organizations or institutions to take action on issues they deemed important[36].

DATA-SHARING PROCESSES

Within the literature reviewed, we did not identify any social capacity interventions that included **data-sharing processes** in the conventional sense (e.g., data banks, centralized data) as a core feature of their intervention model. However, we did identify many data-informed social capacity interventions that reframed what was considered 'data'. For example, community members, including VVP, were included as key informants with essential expertise to help develop relevant policies and interventions in many of the community-based research interventions[8,15–17,24]. Similarly, the literature did not reveal any broader initiatives that had developed infrastructure to share best practices across settings.

SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS

Many of the **service delivery models** for building social capacity in urban settings are focused on creating places/spaces for informal social interaction (e.g., community gardens, walkable neighbourhoods)[4,6,7,12] and emphasized the strong connection between the built environment and social connectedness. While many of the social capacity interventions were decentralized to respond to local needs[15,30], there were examples of training community health workers centrally to facilitate community-based social capacity interventions in a dispersed manner[22].

SYSTEMS-LEVEL APPROACH

With regards to the integration of a **systems-level approach**, the social capacity intervention literature revealed that the sustainability of these community-based interventions relied dually on strong support from government and broad partnerships across a range of sectors. For instance, some interventions provided seed funding for community leaders to apply their skills and make improvements in their community[6,21]. Other interventions capitalized on broad partnerships, for example with universities and employers to connect young urban leaders to tangible opportunities for upward mobility[26].

KEY MESSAGES

➢ While there is a rich theoretical literature on social capacity, there is limited applied evidence exploring social capacity from a practice and policy perspective.

➢ There are many different approaches that municipalities can take to building social capacity within inner city neighbourhoods, however, these are best developed in meaningful collaboration with community members and organizational partners.

➢ Strengthening social capacity has many positive impacts for individuals such as improved mental health, connections to education/employment opportunities, new skills/experience, stronger social networks, and improved self-rated overall health.

➢ The built environment plays an important role in creating spaces/places for informal interaction and connection among community members.

➢ Building social capacity takes time to develop and requires financial investment and strategic synergetic partnerships to sustain impact over the long-term.

REFERENCES

1. Chaskin, R. J., Brown, P., Venkatesh, S., & Vidal, A. *Building community capacity.* (Aldine de Gruyter, 2001).
2. Labonte, R. Social inclusion/exclusion: Dancing the dialectic. *Health Promotion International* 19, 115–121 (2004).
3. Clancy, E., Marshall, B., & Toumbourou, J. *Preventing and responding to violence and promoting social inclusion and community connection: A research project for the Eastern Metropolitan Social Issues Council (EMSIC).* 1-132 (Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED), 2016). at <www.deakin.edu.au/seed>
4. Harris, N., Minniss, F. & Somerset, S. Refugees connecting with a new country through community food gardening. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11**,** 9202–9216 (2014).
5. Ohmer, M. L., Meadowcroft, P., Freed, K. & Lewis, E. Community gardening and community development: Individual, social and community benefits of a community conservation program. *Journal of Community Practice* 17, 377–399 (2009).
6. Firth, C., Maye, D. & Pearson, D. Developing "community" in community gardens. *Local Environment* 16, 555–568 (2011).
7. Ghose, R., & Pettygrove, M. Urban community gardens as spaces of citizenship. *Antipode* 46, 1092–1112 (2014).
8. Okvat, H. A., & Zautra, A. J. Community gardening: A parsimonious path to individual, community, and environmental resilience. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 47, 374–387 (2011).
9. Fromm, D. Seeding community: Collaborative housing as a strategy for social and neighbourhood repair. *Built Environment* 38, 364–394 (2012).
10. Tach, L. M. More than bricks and mortar: Neighborhood frames, social processes, and the mixed-income redevelopment of a public housing project. *City & Community* 8, 269–299 (2009).
11. Kurwa, R. Deconcentration without integration: Examining the social outcomes of housing choice voucher movement in Los Angeles County. *City & Community* 14, 364–391 (2015).
12. Wood, L., Frank, D., & Giles-Corti, B. Sense of community and its relationship with walking and neighbourhood design. *Social Science & Medicine* 70, 1381-1390 (2010).
13. Kingsley, J., Townsend, M., & Henderson-Wilson, C. Cultivating health and wellbeing: Members' perceptions of the health benefits of a Port Melbourne community garden. *Leisure Studies* 28, 207–219 (2009).
14. Rosol, M. Community volunteering as neoliberal strategy? Green space production in Berlin. *Antipode* 44, 239–257 (2012).
15. Berg, M., Coman, E., & Schensul, J. J. Youth action research for prevention: A multi-level intervention designed to increase efficacy and empowerment among urban youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 43, 345–359 (2009).
16. Iwasaki, Y. The role of youth engagement in positive youth development and social justice youth development for high-risk, marginalised youth. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 21, 267-278 (2016).
17. Torres-Harding, S., Baber, A., Hilvers, J., Hobbs, N., & Maly, M. Children as agents of social and community change: Enhancing youth empowerment through participation in a school-based social activism project. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 13, 3-18 (2018).
18. LaFromboise, T. D., & Lewis, H. A. The Zuni Life Skills Development Program: A school/community-based suicide prevention intervention. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 38, 343–353 (2008).
19. Ayón, C., & Lee, C. D. Building strong communities: An evaluation of a neighborhood leadership program in a diverse urban area. *Journal of Community Psychology* 37, 975–986 (2009).

20. Smith, S., Bellaby, P., & Lindsay, S. Social inclusion at different scales in the urban environment: Locating the community to empower. *Urban Studies* 47, 1439–1457 (2010).
21. Goodman, L., Wilson, M., & Reed Adams, J. Building community leaders in underserved communities: An exploration of the role of seed-funding for community projects by program graduates. *Journal of Community Practice,* 1-19 (2017).
22. Michael, Y. L., Farquhar, S. A., Wiggins, N., & Green, M. K. Findings from a community-based participatory prevention research intervention designed to increase social capital in Latino and African American communities. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 10, 281–289 (2008).
23. BC Centre for Social Enterprise. What is social enterprise? (2018) at <https://centreforsocialenterprise.com/what-is-social-enterprise/>
24. Ferguson, K. M., & Xie, B. Feasibility study of the social enterprise intervention with homeless youth. *Research on Social Work Practice* 18, 5–19 (2008).
25. Kwate, N. O. A. "Racism Still Exists": A public health intervention using racism "Countermarketing" outdoor advertising in a black neighborhood. *Journal of Urban Health* 91, 851–872 (2014).
26. Spaaij, R. Sport as a vehicle for social mobility and regulation of disadvantaged urban youth. *Intnational Review for the Sociology of Sport* 44, 247–264 (2009).
27. Richardson, J. B. Beyond the playing field: Coaches as social capital for inner-city adolescent African-American males. *Journal of African American Studies* 16, 171–194 (2012).
28. Kinser, P. & Masho, S. "I Just Start Crying for No Reason": The experience of stress and depression in pregnant, urban, African-American adolescents and their perception of yoga as a management strategy. *Women's Health Issues* 25, 142–148 (2015).
29. Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Citizen engagement. (2012) at <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/41592.html>
30. Semenza, J. C., & March, T. L. An urban community-based intervention to advance social interactions. *Environment and Behavior* 41, 22–42 (2009).
31. Srinivas, G. L., Benson, M., Worley, S., & Schulte, E. A clinic-based breastfeeding peer counselor intervention in an urban, low-income population: Interaction with breastfeeding attitude. *Journal of Human Lactation* 31, 120–128 (2015).
32. Stewart, M., Reutter, L., Letourneau, N., & Makwarimba, E. A support intervention to promote health and coping among homeless youths. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 41, 55-77 (2009).
33. Shin, A. Surkan, P. J., Coutinho, A. J., Suratkar, S. R., Campbell, R. K., Rowan, M., Sharma, S., Dennisuk, L. A., Karlsen, M., Gass, A., & Gittelsohn, J. Impact of Baltimore Healthy Eating Zones: An environmental intervention to improve diet among African American youth. *Health Education & Behavior* 42, 97S–105S (2015).
34. Mack, J. Social exclusion. (2016). at <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/definitions-poverty/social-exclusion>
35. Alaimo, K., Reischl, T. M., & Allen, J. O. Community gardening, neighborhood meetings, and social capital. *Journal of Community Psychology* 38, 497–514 (2010).
36. Rogers, A., Huxley, P., Evans, S., & Gately, C. More than jobs and houses: Mental health, quality of life and the perceptions of locality in an area undergoing urban regeneration. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric. Epidemiology* 43, 364–372 (2008).