

Toronto Social Capital Project

A Toronto's Vital Signs Initiative

The Toronto Social Capital Project is a major new research initiative to map the level of social trust and community engagement among residents, and provide a foundation for strengthening the social fabric of the city.

What is social capital? Social capital is the term used to describe the vibrancy of social networks and the extent to which individuals and communities trust and rely upon one another. Social trust is essential for communities to function, for people from different backgrounds to find common ground, and for residents to have access to opportunities that will improve their lives. There is ample evidence that high levels of trust and social connection are not simply “feel good” notions, but key ingredients to making both individuals and communities productive, healthy and safe.

Why is this important for Toronto? Toronto is among the most ethnically diverse cities on the planet, and widely recognized as having avoided the ethnic tensions experienced in many other cities. While there is good reason to feel proud about the city’s diversity, previous research suggests social capital is more easily achieved in smaller homogeneous communities (when members share historical, ethnic and cultural ties) than in larger and more diverse metropolitan areas.

In Toronto’s most recent *Vital Signs* report, the Toronto Foundation confirms our city to be among the most liveable cities in the world. At the same time, the annual reports have long been tracking numerous trends that will challenge the city to remain liveable and vibrant, including a fast-growing and aging population, an ever-expanding ethnic diversity, and an increasing division into high and low income neighbourhoods. Other disturbing trends include high youth unemployment, declining social mobility, persistent child poverty and growing public health challenges.

Given these trends, social capital will become even more important to our collective wellbeing. Will we develop the networks and resources needed to address the challenges and maintain our quality of life. The first step is to take stock of our social capital.

Why we need to measure social capital now? There are good benchmarks for Toronto’s economic performance, public health, financial security, and infrastructure, but very little evidence about its social capital. This project will address this gap through comprehensive research to document how the city is doing today, how it has changed, and identify areas of success and challenges. Some of the questions that will be answered include:

- To what extent do Torontonians trust one another?
- How often do they feel connected to, and actively engage with, their neighbours, with people outside of their cultural groups, and with community organizations?
- How is this similar or different across the many diverse parts of Toronto, by neighbourhood, ethnic group, socio-economic status and generation?

These questions matter because social trust and engagement are critical to a good quality of life, a healthy population, safe streets, and economic prosperity.

Toronto Social Capital Project. This project will provide the public, private, not-for-profit, and philanthropic sectors with the empirical basis for data-driven policies, programs initiatives, and investments that will sustain and strengthen the community's social capital, social cohesion and subjective well-being, and the benefits that flow from them.

The project will entail a comprehensive survey of the Toronto population to measure social capital using both established indicators from previous research in other jurisdictions as well as new measures tailored to the City. The research will also incorporate relevant measures of people's circumstances and outcomes (e.g., economic, public health, well-being) to help determine their link to social capital. The survey will encompass a large sample of Toronto residents (between 4,000 and 5,000) to ensure coverage of the City's diverse population and allow comparisons at a local area level.

The project is being conducted in three phases:

- Phase 1 – Project scoping and stakeholder outreach (January – September 2015)
- Phase 2 – Research design and implementation (October 2015 – September 2016)
- Phase 3 - Public release and community engagement (October 2016 – March 2017)

Phase 3 will involve active engagement with community leaders and organizations across the City to ensure the findings and insights are understood, and to encourage their use in future planning, decision-making and investments.

The Toronto Social Capital Project is a collaborative initiative of six leading civic organizations: the Environics Institute for Survey Research, the Toronto Foundation, the YMCA of Greater Toronto, the City of Toronto, the Metcalf Foundation and Maytree.

What the study will accomplish. This study will be the first of its kind in Canada, and will make an important contribution to the future of Toronto in terms of:

- Providing all sectors with a sound empirical basis for reviewing and building policies, initiatives and investments that support and strengthen the City's social capital resources in ways that enhance the broader community;
- Identifying new areas of opportunity for addressing challenges and supporting positive change;
- Raising awareness of the importance and benefits of social trust, reciprocity and community involvement, so these are given a greater priority; and
- Establishing a benchmark against which progress can be measured over time.

Opportunities for sponsorship. The project is currently inviting organization in the private, public and non-profit sectors to participate as sponsors. In return for a financial contribution to help cover the research and dissemination costs, sponsors will be publicly recognized and be given the opportunity to participate in the public release and community outreach activities once the study is completed.

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