

Social Capital and Health

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Social capital and health - a definition

Social capital

- Social capital represents the degree of social cohesion which exists in communities. It refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust, and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.
- World Health Organisation, Health Promotion Glossary, Geneva, 1998

Social capital and health - WHO definition cont.

- Social capital is created from the myriad of everyday interactions between people, and is embodied in such structures as civic and religious groups, family membership, informal community networks, and in norms of voluntarism, altruism and trust. The stronger these networks and bonds, the more likely it is that members of a community will co-operate for mutual benefit. In this way social capital creates health, and may enhance the benefits of investments for health.

Social capital and health

- Thus far an observed relationship has been identified between various measurable attributes of “social capital” and improved health status (reduced infant mortality, increased life expectancy, lower deaths from specific causes) in individuals and communities (eg Kawachi 1997, Berkman 2000, and Lynch 2001)
- Not new as a concept in health research - closely related to existing theories that link social support and resilience to improved health status. Lynch refers to it as “a new and more fashionable label for investigations into what used to be called social support”

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Various explanations as to why this relationship exists:

- more, and more positive social interactions provide tangible assistance and care
- greater resources in the community that provide support and mutual aid
- greater willingness and capacity to make use of community resources (including health services)

Some words of caution

- The evidence of links to improved health are mostly observational and may be explained by other mechanisms or factors
- The definition and measurement are imprecise for operational use
- There is little prospective research that suggest it is possible to “create” or build social capital to improve health
- Joining a club does not have the same health benefits as quitting smoking

Health Development Agency research programme on social capital and health

Key aims: To define, measure and investigate the links to health and thereby:

- Develop a new set of social indicators that can measure different elements of social capital
- Contribute to the development of guidelines for good practice in community participation projects for health
- Strengthen the evidence base for social models of health

Next steps

- Building social capital not seen as alternative, but complementary to efforts to address social, economic and environmental determinants of health
- Social capital already providing a useful organising framework for community based health interventions
- Measures of social capital are providing a good structure for assessing impact and explaining outcome of community based health interventions
- Health Development Agency research programme dissemination meeting (June 20-1)