



## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

# Increasing Youth Serving Organizations' capacity to build social capital among youth

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Social capital—connections to resources and opportunities through social and community networks—improves a youth's likelihood of future employment, educational achievement, and healthy development. Youth-serving organizations (YSOs) present adolescents opportunities to grow and strengthen their social networks, increasing their overall net social capital. While YSOs present a unique opportunity to enhance youths' social capital, it is not known if social capital is a focus of YSO programming for youth.

Our project employed a community-based participatory action research (CBPR) approach to assess if and how YSOs in California integrate social capital into their programming and if YSOs see a need for a social-capital curriculum or measurement tools related to social capital.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Almost 3 out of 4 YSOs provided programming that would enhance a youth's social capital
- Only 8 YSOs focused on building *linking* social capital, a critical asset for youth
- Nearly 80% of YSOs thought social capital was one of the most important assets youth could develop
- 90% of YSOs thought a tool to measure youths' social capital would be of high value

### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

As part of this work, a partnership was formed between the East Oakland Youth Development Center, the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health, and RTI International.

We identified not-for-profit YSOs in California using the 2019 IRS Business Master File from the National Center for Charitable Statistics Data Archive. We randomly invited 170 organizations to participate in a survey, 41 of which (24%) were eligible and completed the survey. The survey assessed if the organization was familiar with the term “social capital” and if their current programming aimed to build youths' social capital. Embedded throughout the survey were open-ended questions that allowed the

### TYPES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

- **Bonding:** relationships among individuals with similar backgrounds (“people like me”)
- **Bridging:** relationships among people with different backgrounds (“people different from me”)
- **Linking:** connections with institutions and actors that hold substantially different levels of power

participant to describe their program and any barriers to developing social capital among youth.

## WHAT WE FOUND

The survey elicited a broad range of info about how YSOs think about and incorporate social capital into their program. Despite the fact that 40% of respondents (n=15) were not familiar with the term “social capital,” once we provided a definition—relationships with people or organizations that expand opportunities for youth, 78% of YSOs said it was one of the most important assets a youth could develop.

Thirty YSOs programming focused on building some aspect of social capital. Seventeen YSOs addressed *bonding* social capital (e.g., developing relationships with each other); 17 addressed *bridging* social capital (e.g., connecting youth with community-based organizations that deliver workshops and networking opportunities. Eight developed *linking* social capital (e.g., providing internship opportunities that exposed young people to institutions outside of their normal networks).

YSOs described many barriers to helping youth access social capital. Respondents most frequently cited logistical concerns, such as a lack of funding, transportation and staff capacity. Seven organizations (16%) cited youths’ socioeconomic challenges as being a barrier to building social capital, as some youth face challenges (e.g., language barriers) outside the program that make participation difficult. Nine organizations (21%) cited relationship and trust building as being a primary barrier to building social capital, noting a lack of “buy in” from youth stemming from a lack of staff members who reflected the racial demographics of the youth that they served as barriers to building social capital.

YSOs recognized the need for more tools to help them build youths’ social capital. Over 90% of respondents felt that a social capital measurement tool would be valuable. Over half of respondents said they’d be interested in helping to develop a social capital curriculum, and all but 3 YSOs said

**“We really emphasize how our young people should put themselves in position to increase their social capital. That said, the structure of our program does not have any explicit ways in which we help to build that capital outside of the young people working directly with one another.”**

— *Participating YSO*

they would adopt or might adopt such a curriculum if it were available.

## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Our findings suggest that YSOs recognize that multiple positive impacts stem from strengthening and building social capital among young people. While nonprofit organizations provide an important environment in which young people develop their social networks and available resources, our findings suggest that YSOs need more tools available to them to fully deliver.

The findings from this study have important implications for nonprofit organizations providing youth development programming. As expected, respondents described programming most associated with bonding and bridging social capital, rather than linking. Though strengthening the resources and relationships within and just outside of a youth’s immediate environment is important, it is also vitally important to connect young people to institutions and influencers significantly outside of normal social circles. This



**Mentoring and connecting youth to outside sources of support is a focus of many YSOs across CA. However, it is important that these relationships be reciprocal in nature and lasting over time to be considered social capital.**

approach would require that YSOs also focus on the development of their own organizational social capital. Linking social capital activities that benefit program participants are best facilitated when the YSOs have cultivated and sustained meaningful connections over time (i.e., organizational social capital development). For example, developing relationships with a university admissions department can lead to increased exposure to scholarships and other educational opportunities later in life. Any social capital curriculum for young people needs to integrate a mechanism for lasting connections (e.g., beyond summer job employment or summer camps).

Our findings highlight possible directions for programmatic change and growth among YSOs. The majority of YSOs surveyed saw significant value in having access to both a social capital curriculum and to tools to measure social capital among youth. Additionally, given the disconnect between widespread use of the term “social capital” in academia but limited use among YSOs (only 40% of respondents in our study were familiar with the term), trainings for YSOs in social capital could expand opportunities for YSOs and youth. Organizations not familiar with language used in academia may forego potential

funding opportunities resulting from misaligned terminology.

There is a clear interest among respondents to better understand and potentially incorporate social capital activities into their current programming. However, we would recommend the following steps be taken to move these opportunities forward. First, clear definitions of social capital types are needed to better understand how best to align specific activities to YSO programming. For example, what are the requisite skills and program focuses needed to support bonding, bridging, or linking social capital activities. Second, we recommend the need for better social capital measurement. Our findings suggest that developing a tool to measure social capital and evaluate its effectiveness would be of critical importance to YSOs, particularly for program improvement and potential funding opportunities. Future research centered on social capital should involve YSOs to ensure greater uptake and impact.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

This brief was authored by Brenda Mathias, Kiran Magee, Lizette Avina and Kristine Madsen of the University of California, Berkeley; Phillip Graham of RTI International; Regina Jackson, President and CEO of the East Oakland Youth Development Center. Drs. Madsen and Graham and Ms. Jackson are 2020 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellow(s). For questions please contact: [Brenda\\_mathias@berkeley.edu](mailto:Brenda_mathias@berkeley.edu).