2017 CHAMPION OF CHILDREN REPORT
Strengthening Social Fabric
Executive Summary
Science is unequivocal, we need each other. Our lives are constellations of relationships: strong and weak; distant or close. We are our happiest selves when we are in relationships that foster mutuality and trust, and are in environments that support thriving. We know the structures and supports needed to facilitate the successful operation of both of these sets of relationships--with each other, and with systems. For children to thrive, they need supportive and secure families; for families to thrive, they need supportive and secure neighborhoods. Our last three Champion of Children reports have laid the ground work; here we are bringing it all together with the singular focus of strengthening social fabric in our communities.

The term social capital is used to describe relationships based in trust, reciprocity, and shared values. These “norms of reciprocity” can emerge in numerous forms—flows of information, bonding networks to connect those who share similarities among one another, bridging networks to form networks across diverse groups, and even collective action. Among other factors, educational attainment, household income, and occupation all play a role in not only how networks form, but also how strong they are. Those equipped with advantageous status (highly educated, wealthy, high occupational prestige) are better able to translate their strong network tie advantages to benefit their children, whereas those parents at the other end of the status spectrum have weaker social network ties that can limit their children’s opportunity structure. Thus, the inequality in network strength at the parental level can translate to inequality in the opportunities present for future generations. The importance of social networks to children’s success should not be undervalued. In central Ohio, children born near the bottom fifth of the income ladder only have a 5% chance of making it to the top fifth by the time they are age 30. A study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland documented that 50% of our Columbus neighborhoods qualify as low-income, spatially cut off from resources and opportunities. What chances are we providing children in these neighborhoods?

In this year’s report we are diving deeper to more fully explore the constellations of relationships that give rise to strong environments: what matters for these relationships? How can we nurture them? Do our neighborhoods support strong relationships? Do our institutions? Does authentic engagement exist?

WEAVING A STRONG SOCIAL FABRIC: MOVING BEYOND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social fabric refers to the strength of relationships created by authentic interactions and engagement between a community’s residents, organizations, schools, and businesses. While the definitions of social capital and social fabric are similar, social fabric capitalizes on existing social capital by explicitly naming authenticity and equity as key elements of relationship-building. United Way of Central Ohio has determined that, in order to tackle the issues that matter most in reducing poverty, it is critical to focus efforts in local neighborhoods of great need, and great potential. Champion of Children embraces this neighborhood work as well, to ensure children are linked to resources and surrounded by strong support systems that help them reach their full potential. By listening to residents and co-creating smart solutions that help build trust and a sense of belonging, we can work together to connect community members in meaningful ways that strengthen social fabric and lead to strong families and vibrant neighborhoods.
SOCIAL ISOLATION AND THE SCIENCE OF LONELINESS

Loneliness can ravage our bodies and our brains. Research is demonstrating the many ways in which living in loneliness is a major risk factor for broad-based mortality and morbidity: “loneliness can not only hasten death in sick people, it can make well people sick—and through the same method [as trauma]: by putting the body in fight-or-flight mode.”6 And while genes may predispose children to loneliness, loneliness is only about half heritable: 52% of loneliness comes from the environment in which children grow up.7 Children growing up without secure and loving attachments will tend toward loneliness for the rest of their lives. Persistent loneliness not only wreaks physiological havoc on the body, but also imparts additional mental or emotional effects, such as moodiness, self-doubt, sensitivity to criticism, and so on, all of which make social connections more difficult.

ENGAGING TO IMPROVE THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Despite the disparaging situation for many living in poverty in Central Ohio, there are several means to capitalize on the social capital and social fabric to combat isolation and loneliness. Specific to central Ohio, the following report highlights the ways in which those in the communities are focusing on forming authentic connections between individuals and institutions to make a positive and flourishing environment. Strategies discussed include:

BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL: In communities where the social fabric has been frayed, building social capital can play an important role in mending community relationships in order to help give children an environment conducive to healthy growth. Often, social capital can be built and shared in third places—or community spaces that act as natural points for people to meet as neighbors and share their gifts.

MEETING COMMUNITY MEMBERS AT THEIR DOOR: In order to build and maintain social fabric, it’s important to meet community members ‘where they are’—meaning at times and in places where they tend to gather. This is especially important for community members who may be experiencing many difficulties related to poverty. When the threads of the community social fabric reflect the hopes, dreams, and realities of the whole community, a strong social fabric is created that supports the thriving of families.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY MEMBERS: Community members from all walks of life have many assets and gifts that can be useful for creating nurturing communities. Community wisdom and the ability to build rapport or reach out to diverse people are vital native skills that are activated within a strong social fabric. The social fabric of communities is in turn made up of authentic community relationships. Empowering community members makes it easier for them to be the driving force behind engagement activities, in turn ensuring authenticity and relevancy.

KEEPING PROMISES TO THE COMMUNITY: In order to maintain strong social bonds, it is important for both stakeholders and community members to create ways to make and keep promises to one another. Making and keeping promises is an important mechanism for building trust and furthering honest and open communication. Mutual accountability, community empowerment, and community leadership are important aspects of creating a social fabric that promotes openness, sharing, and a positive environment for children.

Together, these objectives often result in deepening bonds between local institutions and community members because they help institutions move from a transactional relationship with community members—interacting with the community in order to fulfill immediate institutional goals—to transformational relationships characterized by the pursuit of shared long-term goals of community success, and deep and mutual change from the lessons learned together. In this way, institutions can become valued anchors in the community.
METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

To have meaningful social connections is a basic human need. People long to be known to each other. Strengthening the social fabric in our communities can help build these connections and can be done by undertaking the following activities:

1. Promote greater understanding between diverse community members by supporting engagement activities that uplift the gifts everyone brings to the table

2. Promote greater awareness of personal and structural biases by supporting authentic and inclusive community dialogue

3. Promote resident empowerment by using engagement activities to uncover and leverage existing assets and strengthen community bonds

4. Use “third places” that bring community members together in a spirit of inclusion and cooperation

And finally, at a broader societal level, we must continue to push for systems change. As highlighted above, the degree of inequality in central Ohio—a community that boasts a robust economy, strong public-private partnerships, and a diverse mix of people—is profound and hurts all of us. We must continue to push for policy changes that promote upward mobility and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, which will not only advance an individual’s economic situation, but will benefit future generations, including by virtue of an expanded social network. This is the future. Creating institutional arrangements and communities that support strong interpersonal connections ensures that we all do better, together.

CITATIONS

2. Id.


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