

CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED WORK

Policy-makers, long concerned with countering the effects of poverty, have a growing interest in the concept of social capital and its possible role in improving employability and combating exclusion. Although there are large numbers of studies involving social capital, few have also tested practical policy tools for enhancing it, particularly under a rigorous evaluation design.

The Community Employment Innovation Project (CEIP) was created to assess not only the economic impacts of a three-year, community-based jobs program, but also — and perhaps, more crucially — whether such a program could preserve and possibly improve long-term employability through the maintenance and development of skills and social capital. The availability of social capital can make all the difference between a successful job search and an unsuccessful one. Like human capital, social capital could unfortunately deteriorate rapidly with increasing periods of unemployment, making its availability the lowest among the population that needs it most — the chronically unemployed. Under CEIP, participants held a wide array of jobs, giving them numerous opportunities to work with varied individuals and community organizations. Did this, in turn, enhance social capital in a way that helps future employability?

Social Capital: Network Characteristics and Accessible Resources

Consistent with recent conceptual developments, CEIP adopts a definition of social capital that emphasizes the role of resources within social networks and social ties. More specifically, social capital is characterized by measurable aspects of social networks, including size, types of resources the network can offer, network density and heterogeneity, and the balance of strong and weak ties. Strong ties, such as those between family members and close friends, are commonly referred to as bonding social capital. Measures associated with bonding social capital include the number of contacts who can provide “close-to-home” resources such as help with household chores or emotional support. Weaker ties involving more distant friends and acquaintances — commonly referred to as bridging social capital — are associated with measures such as the number of contacts who can provide specialized advice or help finding a job. In addition to looking at the types of resources provided by contacts, the balance between weak and strong ties can also be assessed by measuring the relative proportions of family, friends and acquaintances in the network.

Related concepts also thought to be important to the measurement of social capital include density and heterogeneity. Networks made up exclusively of family and close friends tend to consist of people with similar socio-demographic characteristics, many of whom could know one another. Such dense, homogeneous networks could limit individuals’ capacity to broaden their horizons and take advantage of new opportunities. As weak ties are gained, networks could become less dense, more heterogeneous, and more likely to generate new opportunities. If weak ties include linkages with persons of higher socio-economic status and/or in positions of influence — commonly referred to as linking social capital — the new ideas can be converted into economic gain.

Enhancing Participants' Social Capital

Of particular interest is whether CEIP can foster the development of bridging and linking social capital, as well as networks that are less dense, more heterogeneous, and achieve a better balance between strong and weak ties than would otherwise have been possible without the program. Because CEIP was intended to enhance social capital in the ways described above, its design and implementation put into place several mechanisms by which such enhancements could take place. The simple act of providing the opportunity for up to three years of steady work ensured that participants could potentially meet new bridging contacts. In addition, many organizers and sponsors were prominent citizens in their communities, usually of high socio-economic status, in positions of influence, and with extensive networks — thus potentially valuable linking contacts.

The succession of varied work placements is one of the primary mechanisms through which social capital might be expected to develop. In fact, participants were encouraged to work on several different projects during their three years of eligibility, making for potentially less dense workplace networks. In addition, because participants were selected throughout the Cape Breton region but CEIP was only implemented in five communities, many participants had opportunities to meet people from outside their communities, leading to potentially more heterogeneous networks.

Finally, CEIP could also have produced increased involvement in community life, outside of regular work hours. In particular, if CEIP increased the extent of formal unpaid volunteering through community organizations, it would provide participants further opportunities for network development, of a kind that could provide a bridge to future jobs.

Impacts on Social Capital

We can observe the impacts of CEIP on social capital after 40 months, which is shortly after program eligibility had ended. These results are compared to those observed at the beginning of the study (baseline) and near the mid-point of eligibility (after 18 months) to assess how impacts evolved throughout the program.

A series of measures of social capital are discussed below, including indicators of both network size and structural characteristics:

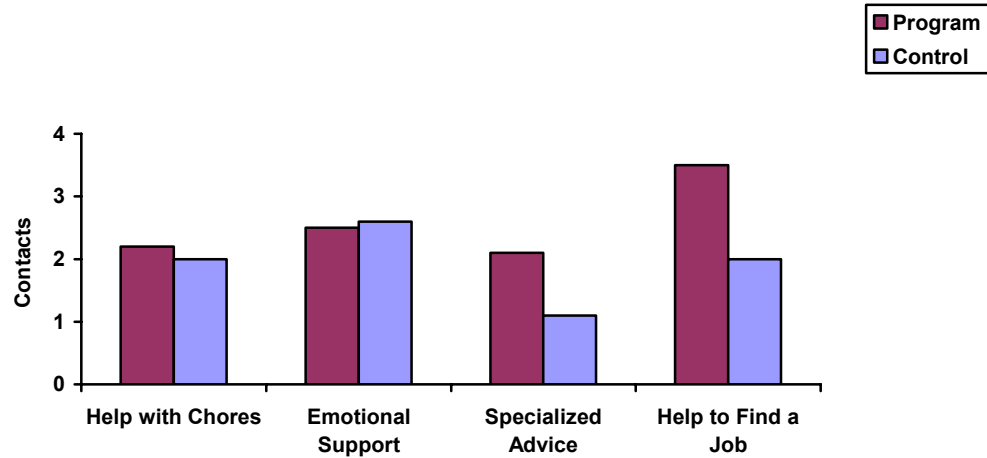
1. The number of contacts that can provide specialized advice or help finding a job (bridging and linking contacts).
2. Relative proportions of family, friends and acquaintances in the network (balance between strong and weak ties).
3. The extent to which all, most or some the participant's contacts knew each other (network density).
4. A composite measure of increasing social capital, combining multiple indicators.

Effects on Network Size

Among the Employment Insurance (EI) sample, there were positive impacts on measures of network size commonly associated with bridging and linking social capital. Figure 1 illustrates that, though there were no differences between the program and control groups at baseline or at 18 months into the study, by 40 months the program group had on average one extra contact for specialized advice (from lawyers or doctors) and two for help finding a job.

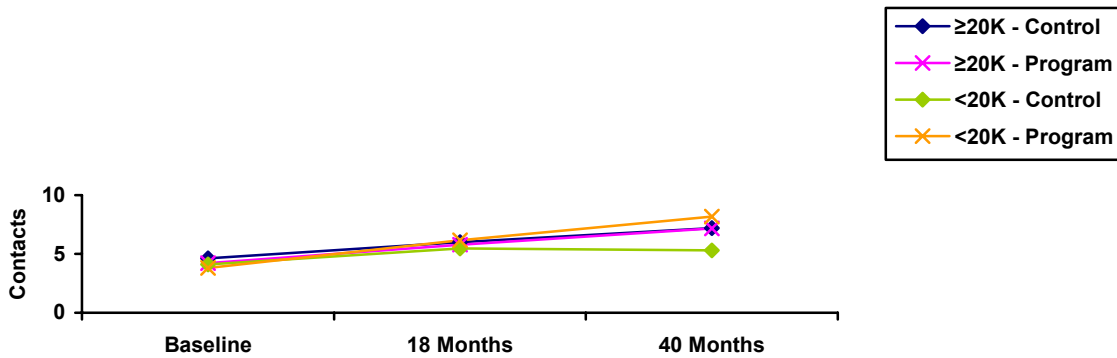
Importantly, these impacts were restricted to those resource types usually associated with bridging and linking ties. There were no impacts on bonding ties over the 40-month period, as EI program and control group members gained roughly the same number of contacts that could provide help with household chores or emotional support. This suggests that the contacts gained by the EI program group would not provide broad, all-purpose help, but, instead, could provide help in specialized areas associated with bridging and linking rather than bonding social capital.

Figure 1: Increase in Number of Contacts, by Resources (EI Sample)



A very important type of resource for the chronically unemployed, particularly those with very low incomes, is a contact that can provide help finding a job. EI program group members with annual incomes below \$20,000 at the beginning of the study benefited the most from CEIP — by 40 months, they had three extra job contacts compared to their control group counterparts (see Figure 2).

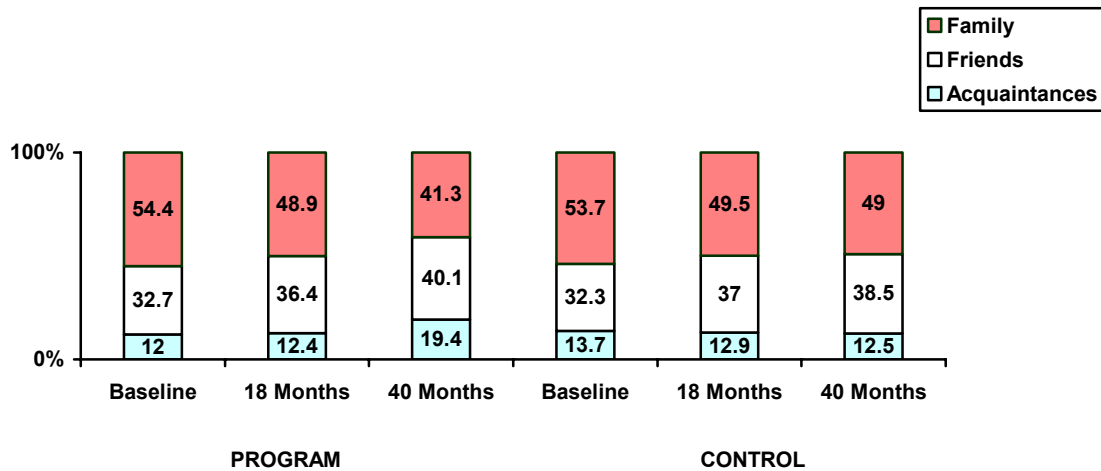
Figure 2: Contacts Who Can Help Find a Job, by Income (EI Sample)



Development of Weak Ties

The proportion of acquaintances in a social network is a measure of access to weak ties, commonly assumed to be associated with bridging and/or linking social capital. Both income assistance (IA) program and control groups started with networks in which the majority of contacts were family members, and the presence of acquaintances was minimal. Although control group networks stayed at around 50 per cent family throughout the entire period, by 40 months the average program group network also showed a reduced proportion of family (from 54 to 41 per cent) and an increased presence of acquaintances (from 12 to 19 per cent — see Figure 3). Gaining weak ties in the form of acquaintances could provide access to previously unavailable social and economic resources.

Figure 3: Changes in Tie Strength, by Proportion of Social Network (IA Sample)



Reductions in Network Density

A reduction in network density — namely, from a network where all or most members know each other to one where only some members know each other — is widely seen as an indicator of enhanced social capital. Less dense networks are thought to be important in accessing resources that could not be available to a single, close-knit group of family and friends. Over the 40-month period, reductions in network density were more likely to occur among program group members, in both the EI and IA samples, than among those in control groups.

In the EI sample, roughly one third of program group members had a reduction in network density, while only one quarter had an increase in density. The reverse was true for control group members — close to one third had an increase, while only one quarter had a decrease in network density (see Figure 4). Among the IA sample, the impact was even greater. Over 40 per cent of program group members had a decrease in density, compared to less than 20 per cent who had an increase. Within the control group, on the other hand, increases and decreases occurred with roughly equal frequency (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Changes in Network Density, from Baseline to 40 Months (EI Sample)

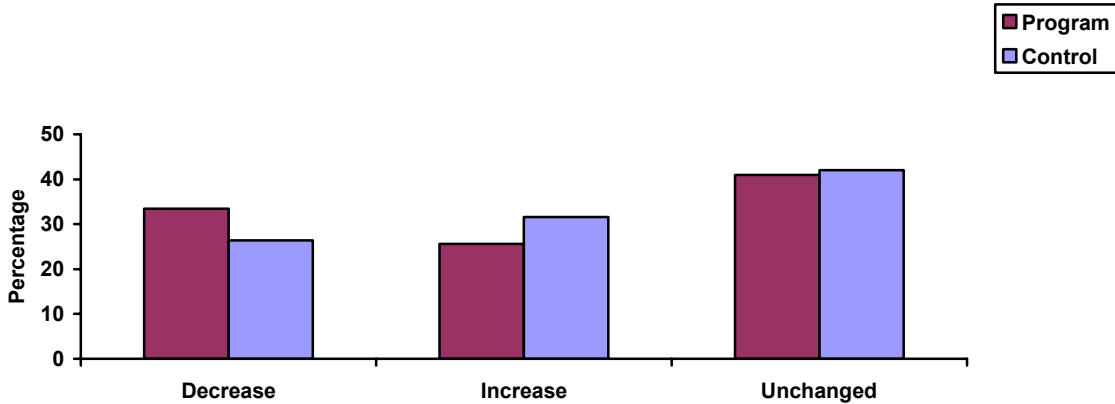
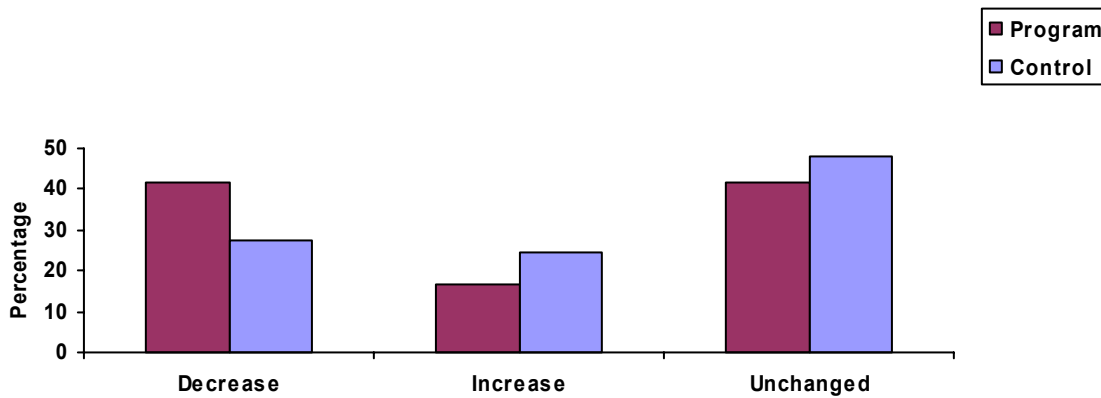


Figure 5: Changes in Network Density, from Baseline to 40 Months (IA Sample)



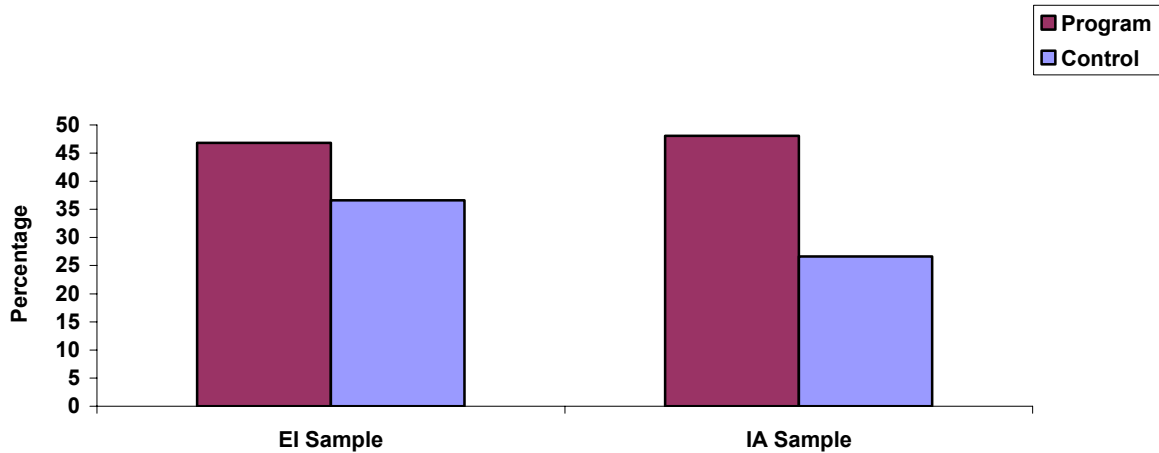
Volunteering and Enhancing Involvement and Inclusion

In addition to the direct effects on social capital, CEIP could also have influenced the extent to which participants were actively involved in their communities. Involvement in local community life brings significant benefits for individuals, not only in terms of reducing social isolation and exclusion, but also by providing further opportunities to expand networks and develop social capital. In particular, when this local involvement takes the form of formal volunteering through organizations, it is a benefit to both individuals and communities.

Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of sample members who volunteered formally through community organizations or groups in the year preceding the 40-month follow-up interview.

Impacts were substantial among the IA sample, where the rate of formal volunteering among program group members was 21 percentage points higher compared to the control group. This was accompanied by a 2.6-hour increase on the average hours volunteered per month. EI program group members were 10 percentage points more likely to volunteer formally and increased their average hours of volunteering by 3.6 hours per month compared to the control group.

Figure 6: Impacts on Formal Volunteering



Government and Its Role in the Development of Social Capital

Although social capital has gained significant attention among policy makers and academics, few studies to date have also actually demonstrated — through rigorous evaluation and with clear definition — that a specific policy measure or program can in fact enhance social capital. Results from CEIP’s interim impact study provide strong evidence that governments can have a role, in partnership with communities, in both developing social capital and improving inclusion and community participation.

In particular, a program of community-based employment could improve the structure of social networks of participants and help expand their bridging contacts, providing access to resources that could improve their labour market success. Furthermore, the three-year duration of eligibility could be an important factor in the development of social capital, as effects arose largely in the second half of the eligibility period. This longer duration provided for more significant job stability and a greater range of opportunities.

These results, however, only reflect interim impacts, which were present shortly after the end of eligibility. A 54-month survey will allow for the assessment of impacts more than a year after the end of the program, to determine if improvements in social capital can be maintained or whether they deteriorate. These results also do not address the issue of the utilization of social capital. Questions on the use of social networks have been added to the final participant follow-up survey in order to assess whether and how social capital is actively used once it is acquired.