

# Case Studies of Social Capital at Work

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## Introduction

The construct of “social capital,” defined earlier in this volume, can be summarized as the notion that social connections to others hold value for people’s lives, value which translates into increased productivity for both individuals and groups, that enriches people’s well-being and sense of purpose and meaning in life, and which helps build communities (Putnam, 2000). Social capital also implies the formation of social, interpersonal networks which are guided by a norm of reciprocity and giving to others. These social networks promote physical and psychological health for individuals (e.g., through gainful employment and a sense of belonging), and promote community development through civic engagement (Johnson, 2016 in this volume). Durlak and Gillespie (2003) additionally cited Loury’s (1987) related definition of social capital as resources and/or abilities which emerge from social organization and interpersonal interaction. Thus, social capital is related to individual, societal, or governmental actions/policies which promote human interaction, as well as purposeful activities which contribute to one’s community and the “greater good.” The goal of the current chapter is to describe four occurrences in twentieth-century history as “case studies” of ways in which social capital was increased in the United States. Each of these examples has had the effect of building and sustaining social capital and thus improving the quality of life for Americans. Moreover, each example helps to illuminate the theme of a “social capital tradition” in the history of the United States.

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## Social Capital as a National Tradition

George Washington (1732–1799) is quoted as having said “Let your heart feel for the affliction and distresses of everyone” (Notable Quotes, n.d.). While it seems to these authors that the main sentiment expressed in this quotation is one of empathy, it is also possible that a better injunction to become active in one’s community and to strive to “give back” could not be found. Moreover, community engagement initiatives are a longstanding part of United States history. Putnam’s masterful 2000 work (*Bowling Alone*) noted the American tradition of social capital, and also detailed changes in Americans’ rates of engagement in community activities across recent generations. He noted a decline, since the mid-1960s, in rates of membership in community organizations and volunteerism, team- and league-based recreational activities, and civic engagement generally, positing that this change was generationally linked, related to US economic changes (e.g., the need for two-income versus one-income families), and also the existence of television as competition for Americans’ leisure time. Putnam also noted an irony in this change, as 1960s leaders had expected a surge in participation and joining of all types of community activities with the population increase from the “Baby Boom” cohort of youth. Furthermore, not too long ago, social capital was optimistically linked to proposed community improvements, such as the dream of revitalization of impoverished neighborhoods that became a central goal of the presidential campaign of Robert F. Kennedy (Clarke, 2008). Finally, social capital is good for national and personal health. Putnam (2000) cited evidence that communities with high social capital show less crime, and have residents who are more physically fit and who trust each other more. In sum, social capital is an intrinsic part of healthy communities and an American tradition, and it can become so again.

Bass (2013) reviewed government-sanctioned, non-military service programs (e.g., the Civilian Conservation Corps [CCC] and Volunteers in Service to America [VISTA]), which she termed “domestic national service.” She named a major goal and benefit of these programs as being the enhancement of participants’ notions of what it means to be a citizen. Thus, a primary and very positive effect of civilian service programs is promoting and advancing citizenship. Bass further specified that the concept of “citizenship” could refer to a legal status (constitutional citizenship), a sense of patriotism, a call to public work and community-building, or a motivation to help fellow citizens in need. All of these notions of citizenship fit a social capital model of service. The definitions exemplify social interconnectedness, the exchange of mutually beneficial goods and actions, and personal commitment to a civic cause. Additionally, the framework provided by Coles 1993 book, *The Call of Service*, is useful as it gives numerous examples of other-directed service to one’s community, categorizing these examples into seven basic types: (1) “social and political struggle,” (2) “community service,” (3) “personal gestures and encounters,” (4) “charity,” (5) “religiously sanctioned action,” (6) “government-sanctioned action,” and (7) “service to country.” We present below four examples of “government-sanctioned action” which have promoted social capital through community

service and/or service to the country. Each of these programs ultimately bettered millions of lives, imbued a sense of purpose and civic responsibility, and strengthened belief in government as a force for good (Bass, 2013; Humes, 2006). Taken together, these twentieth-century national service programs shaped and benefitted individuals' lives as well as improving our nation.

## **The Works Progress Administration**

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created during the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Taylor, 2009). Roosevelt, first elected in 1932, was the driving force behind a series of economic stimulus programs (from his campaign promise of a “New Deal” and collectively coordinated by a “National Recovery Administration [NRA]”) which were intended to counter the financial devastation of the Great Depression. The national economic downturn of the Depression, which began with the plummeting of Wall Street stock values in the 1929 episode known as the stock market “Crash,” permanently changed the financial landscape of the United States (Shlaes, 2007). These events decimated the financial capital and business capability of banks and corporations, led to a record high 25 % unemployment rate in the United States, and destroyed the livelihoods of millions. A majority of American families saw a precipitous downturn in their financial state, through loss of savings when banks “failed” (closed), through inability to find jobs or being terminated from jobs when businesses shut their doors, or from the lack of financial plans to guard their savings or investments. Fifteen million US citizens were unemployed when Roosevelt took office in early 1933 (Shlaes, 2007).

The new president immediately took action in promoting his New Deal stimulus programs, which were designed to “jump-start” the national economy. Accordingly, WPA legislation brought about specific changes. First, WPA's existence allowed new jobs to be created. One example is through recruitment of workers for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which employed civilians (young men, and also some older World War I veterans) to build new recreational facilities nationwide (e.g., in the National Park System), overhaul infrastructure in existing parks and recreational facilities, and provide job skills to the unemployed or underemployed. Secondly, similar subsidized programs led to the National Youth Administration (NYA) as well as large-scale demonstration projects such as construction of the Hoover Dam (Shlaes, 2007). The WPA also generated programs to support US agriculture, and create new forms of energy utilization through the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).

While the legacy created by the WPA is not without its drawbacks, the momentum of this movement to stimulate a Depression-era economy also is said by many to have stimulated a national recovery of a “can-do” attitude and ethic, albeit one connected in time to the onset of World War II. Putnam (2000) noted that the mindset of civic engagement and collectivism shown by many Americans up to the 1970s is likely closely related to that cohort of citizens whose sacrifice and interdependence was essential in order to pursue victory in WW II.

WPA programs directly affected millions of Americans who went on to become exemplars of community service. Just one example is the “CCC Alumni,” i.e., former Civilian Conservation Corps workers, who utilized the practical skills gained in this first job to develop technical, military, or business careers. Bass (2013) cited a figure of three million participants in the CCC in its 9-year existence. Barry (1999) noted that participants’ CCC involvement included lasting improvements in literacy. CCC’s *Camp Life Reader and Workbook* included vocabulary words, grammar, and writing exercises.

Table 1 outlines possible “social capital contributions” and matches characteristics of WPA programs with these outcomes. Examples are the promotion of citizens’ engagement in one’s community via volunteer service activities, promotion of understanding and acceptance of those different from oneself, improvement of individuals’ educational opportunity and upward mobility, encouraging social connectedness via social cohesion, and others. The social capital impact of WPA programs is summarized in this table.

**Table 1** Social capital contributions of four key twentieth-century social capital initiatives

Government-Sanctioned Action Can	WPA	G.I. Bill	Head Start	VISTA
<i>For individuals:</i>				
Promote reciprocity and other-directedness	*		*	*
Foster acceptance of diversity	*	*	*	*
Increase social connectedness	*	*	*	*
Improve physical health	*		*	
Enhance sense of well-being	*		*	
Increase commitment to civic causes and the “greater good”	*	*		*
Raise consciousness of social inequality and promote social justice		*	*	*
<i>For families:</i>				
Improve literacy	*	*	*	*
Allow upward mobility	*	*	*	*
Provide youth with extracurricular/volunteer activities	*	*	*	*
Provide job skills and employment opportunity	*	*		*
Foster improved family relationships			*	*
Increase educational opportunity and attainment	*	*	*	*
<i>For Communities:</i>				
Stimulate participation in government (public meeting attendance, voting, volunteerism) & community engagement	*	*	*	*
Promote and increase community involvement	*	*	*	*
Promote persons’ identity as citizens	*	*	*	*
Increase goods and resources available to all	*	*	*	*

Created by authors, J. Gillespie & L. Mutignani, (2015). Sources for table components adapted from Bass (2013), Humes, (2006), Mettler (2005), U.S. National Conference on Citizenship (2012).

## The GI Bill of Rights

The G.I. Bill of Rights (or, simply, the “GI Bill”), formally known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, was a legislative effort intended to provide educational opportunity to returning World War II veterans. Its effects ultimately became far-reaching, however, to the extent that Mettler (2005) noted that the GI Bill is often pointed to as “one of the most significant social policies ever enacted in the United States” (p. 345). Mettler (2005) detailed the act’s original intent as being a vehicle for economic assistance to veterans of WW II, in part due to national sentiment that veterans of World War I had not received their due in terms of benefits and assistance. The GI Bill’s main provisions were to provide affordable housing and tuition-free college educations to returning veterans, and it was predicted (Humes, 2006) that enrollees would number in the hundreds of thousands. Instead, a total of eight million US veterans eventually utilized their GI Bill opportunities, which built a new socioeconomic level, uplifted individuals’ daily existence, and transformed communities.

The GI Bill, as enacted, was really a program representing a compromise of sorts. President Roosevelt’s initial vision for the country at the time of his election included sweeping changes in access to housing, education, employment, retirement benefits, and healthcare, and his plan might have completely “reinvented” the nation after the war (Humes, 2006). In contrast, American Legion lobbyists advocated for specific and modest legislation to help veterans, to return their level of opportunity to one commensurate with conditions before the war. It has been noted that neither goal was attained as envisioned, but that instead, the GI Bill led to massive changes that far exceeded expectations: “a nation of renters [to] a nation of homeowners. ...college would be transformed from an elite bastion to a middle-class entitlement.” (Humes, 2006, p. 10). Humes continues: “Educations would be made possible for fourteen future Nobel Prize winners, three Supreme Court Justices ... a dozen senators.” Humes gives figures indicating that the GI Bill funded educations of tens of thousands of American scientists, lawyers, and physicians, and hundreds of thousands of engineers and teachers.

Humes’ account of the GI Bill vividly portrays the life of Allan Howerton, of Rahway, New Jersey, as a GI Bill “success story”. Howerton was raised by aunts in Kentucky after his mother died when he was nine years old and his father relocated to find work. Upon graduating high school in 1941, he worked at a White Castle hamburger restaurant for a weekly salary of less than twenty dollars. Following Pearl Harbor, Howerton was drafted, but was offered by Army recruiters the opportunity to enroll in a special officer training college education program which would grant him exemption from combat. Allan’s plans for noncombatant service as an officer vanished when recruitment needs necessitated his deployment overseas, and he landed at Omaha Beach in Normandy within a month of D-Day. He went on to see action in some of the bloodiest battles in Europe. After being discharged from the infantry in 1945, Allan enrolled at the University of Denver and obtained his bachelor’s degree. He went on to a successful career in the US Office of Personnel

Management, working at various posts in Washington, D.C. This, he felt, was truly a miracle for the descendant of itinerant farmers who had sharecropped. Table 1 gives social capital outcomes of the GI Bill.

## Head Start

Head Start is a federally funded national preschool program, begun as one part of the “War on Poverty” programs initiated by the presidential administration of Lyndon Johnson. Zigler and Muenchow (1992, p. 244, as cited by Levine & Perkins, 1997) stated that Head Start has been called “the nation’s most successful educational and social experiment.” Thus, Head Start was intended to affect not only the academic environment of children in need of preschool education, but to also make an impact on communities. It is an integrative program, often cited as a model of “best practice” among programs addressing multiple needs for healthy childhoods and society (Dryfoos, 1994).

Head Start was created as a provision of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act known as Title II, the component of the Act which was intended to address education. Title II legislation mandated the creation of “special programs for the poor located outside the usual framework of public education” (White, 1970, p. 164). Head Start accepted its first pupils in summer pilot programs in 1965. This bold move, as an example of a national “compensatory” preschool program, stemmed from several sources. First, inequities in educational opportunity in the United States had been well-documented, with research indicating that the children of families living in lower socioeconomic levels are often less well-prepared for school (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong, & Duffy, 2014). Head Start’s intended mission was to correct this, and its key goals, summarized by Levine and Perkins (1997), were to: (1) improve both the mental and physical health of its pupils, (2) promote children’s social and emotional learning, (3) increase feelings of dignity and self-worth, (4) allow a raising of educational expectations for children and the fostering of a positive educational experience, and (5) improve children’s “capacity to relate positively to family members and others...developing a responsible attitude toward society” (p. 288). Head Start quickly became a nationwide “early intervention program” delivering “enrichment education” to three through 5-year-olds (Moritsugu et al., 2014).

Head Start programs, still very much in existence today, continue to accept children of any racial or ethnic background, and eligibility is determined by family income (Zigler & Styfco, 1993). Head Start Centers provide child care, a preschool education, nutritional programs, parent counseling and literacy activities, and promote the furthering of individual educational goals not only for the children enrolled but also their parents. In sum, Head Start is a program with holistic and far-reaching effects, at the educational, socioemotional, and societal levels; it continues to hold significant potential to impact levels of social capital. In fact, in this regard, Head Start has been at the forefront of promoting citizen engagement in communities

through its vigorous encouragement of volunteer involvement and parent participation in the program. Head Start parent volunteers have the opportunity to further their personal employment prospects by virtue of having been involved in Head Start; the program subscribes to a “volunteer career ladder” philosophy from which many parents, particularly mothers, have benefitted. Moreover, Head Start leaders have, from its inception, welcomed university–community partnerships; academic faculty (particularly in psychology and education) have utilized this opportunity to build internship, field placement, and “high-impact” educational opportunities for their undergraduate and graduate students (Primavera & Cook, 1997).

Primavera (2000) offers evidence of the impact of Head Start on a parent whose involvement in a “family literacy program” allowed her to become an active participant in her young child’s educational experience. The parent recalled, “Even though I did not receive my high school diploma I feel very good about myself. I see that I am helping my children. When I read the books they think I am so smart and so funny. When I read, it encourages them to be like Mommy, ‘a reader.’ They are proud of me and that makes me proud too.” (p. 94).

Head Start has played a part in the preschool experience of millions of pupils who have grown up to give back in service to their country. Attorney Angel Taveras was a Head Start pupil who grew up to attend Harvard University, Georgetown University Law School, and be elected as the Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, serving from 2011 to 2015 (Greenberg Traurig, 1992). The far-ranging social capital outcomes of Head Start are listed in Table 1.

## **Volunteers in Service to America**

Volunteers in Service to America (AmeriCorps★Vista, 2015) was also begun in 1965, thus, this program marks its 50th anniversary, as does Head Start, in 2015. VISTA (now VISTA/AmeriCorps) was created as a “stateside” version of President Kennedy’s overseas volunteer service organization, the Peace Corps. VISTA, another one of the Johnson Administration’s “War on Poverty” programs, had as its goal to eliminate poverty in America. VISTA’s first workers were assigned to migrant labor camps in California, urban locations in the Northeast such as Hartford, Connecticut, and Appalachian mountain communities in eastern Kentucky. VISTA’s branches or options for service include volunteering in disaster relief, educational needs (including collaboration with Head Start), service to military families and veterans, assisting in environmental and health initiatives, and community and neighborhood development. VISTA is now a part of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and works in partnership with other governmental agencies to offer community-service-based job opportunities to Americans.

Americans who joined VISTA look back on their service years with the organization as memorable and formative. Rep. Gwendolynne Moore served as a Volunteer for three years from 1981 to 1984 and found herself tasked with working with a

neighborhood association to create a credit union for residents of impoverished Milwaukee neighborhoods. She went on to election to the House of Representatives in 2004. The first African-American woman elected to Congress from the state of Wisconsin, she serves on the House Budget Committee and the House Committee on Financial Services (U.S. House of Representatives, 2015). Table 1 gives social capital outcomes of VISTA and AmeriCorps.

## Conclusions

This chapter has articulated the value added to society by occurrences, movements, and legislation which build social capital, given several prototypic examples of social capital-building in American history, and provided case studies of individuals' lives. Social capital's "value added" impact to society remains strong and enduring, and possibilities for the future include the cleaning up of our environment, the revitalization of schools, the mentoring of youth, and making the health of the current generation of school children a national priority. In Table 2, we present examples of Americans whose lives were changed by their involvement in the government-sanctioned programs described in this chapter. Table 3 gives examples of more recent, similar programs, which hold social capital potential for the future.

The VISTA website, highlighting President Barack Obama's Call to Service, gave the following summation, which we feel is a perfect conclusion to this chapter:

The challenges our nation faces cannot be solved by edicts or quick fixes from Washington alone. We can rebuild our schools but we need people to be mentors and tutors in those schools. We can modernize our health care system but we need volunteers in our hospitals and communities to help care for the sick and help people lead healthier lives. We can invest in clean energy, but we need people to use energy-efficient products in their homes and train for the green jobs of the future (AmeriCorps & Vista, 2015).

**Table 2** Notable alumni of twentieth-century social capital-enhancing programs

Program	Person	Contribution
Works Progress Administration (Civilian Conservation Corps)	Archie Moore	Undefeated Light Heavyweight World Boxing Champion
GI Bill	Clint Eastwood	Actor and Academy Award-winning film director
	Robert Dole	WW II Veteran; Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom; US Senator (R-KS)
	George McGovern	WW II Veteran; Awarded Distinguished Flying Cross; US Senator (D-SD)
	Arthur Penn	Film and Television Director/Producer
Head Start	Angel Taveras	Former Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island (D-RI)
Volunteers in Service to America	Gwendolynne Moore	US Congressperson, House of Representatives (D-WI)

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**Table 3** Social capital contributions of twenty-first-century US organizations

Program and website	Founder(s)	Mission
Harlem Children’s Zone (2014) <a href="http://hcz.org/about-us/">http://hcz.org/about-us/</a>	Geoffrey Canada (1990)	Broad goal of the program is to increase positive outcomes for impoverished children including high school graduation and college acceptance. The program’s features focus on education, family, & community influence, and health
State “Promise Zones” (2015) <a href="https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/promise-zones/">https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/promise-zones/</a>	Barack Obama (2013)	Includes federal partnership with community leaders in order to facilitate positive community outcomes such as job creation, economy and education improvement, and crime reduction
Habitat for Humanity (2015) <a href="http://www.habitat.org/how/christian.aspx">http://www.habitat.org/how/christian.aspx</a>	Millard & Linda Fuller (1976)	Works to eliminate homelessness and substandard living conditions through home construction
Compeer (2015) <a href="http://compeerrochester.org/the-compeer-story/">http://compeerrochester.org/the-compeer-story/</a>	Bernice Skirboll (1977)	Works to eliminate the stigma of mental illness via fostering friendships between mental health population and larger community
America Reads (2014) <a href="https://americareads.as.ucsb.edu/about-us/">https://americareads.as.ucsb.edu/about-us/</a>	Bill Clinton (1996)	Targets improvement of math and literacy skills in school age children through tutoring
MoveOn.org (2015) <a href="http://front.moveon.org/about/#.VYSZyflVikp">http://front.moveon.org/about/#.VYSZyflVikp</a>	Joan Blades & Wes Boyd (1998)	Works to involve Americans in politics and policy change with a focus on democratic progressive change campaigns

Created by authors, J. Gillespie & L. Mutignani, (2015).

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