

# Building Social Capital on Purpose

## A Toolkit for Youth and Community Development Professionals



Contribution of 4-H Participation  
to the Development of  
Social Capital within Communities





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### About the Authors

The NCERA 215 project team is a multi-state group of Extension professionals and social science researchers who are studying how youth participation in 4-H youth development programs contributes to the development of youth and community social capital. The NCERA 215 project (Contribution of 4-H Participation to the Development of Social Capital Within Communities) involves practical scholarly work that immerses colleagues and professionals in conversations about the science of youth development, research-informed practice, and helping professionals applying the lens of social capital.

The project team has presented pre-conference and workshop sessions on youth and community social capital at National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals (NAE4-HYDP) and Community Development Society (CDS) annual conferences. At the invitation of USDA National Institute of Food & Agriculture leaders, the team has presented to 4-H professionals from across U.S. states and territories and Canada at the 2020 National 4-H Conference in Washington DC and to teen delegates in the virtual 2021 National 4-H Conference.

As educational and community systems undergo significant changes due to COVID-19, multidisciplinary collaboration, network expansion, and asset-based engagement of youth and communities is paramount. Youth and community development professionals are well-positioned to facilitate those we serve in transitioning to new post-COVID realities, and building social capital is a central theme for our work. It is our hope that the tools highlighted herein foster intentional work at many points of intersection and with many diverse actors within our youth and community programming spheres.



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# Section 1

## Introduction

This section introduces readers to the Toolkit with background information, research questions, and the goals of the authors in compiling this resource for youth and community practitioners. It also details how the Toolkit is organized and includes descriptions of each section.

Much is changing across the landscape of youth and community development, from unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 and renewed vigor for racial equity, to enhanced conceptual frameworks and increased attention to social capital. As youth and community development practitioners, we know strong communities build strong young people, and youth programs can be powerful mechanisms to build youth and communities. We care about young people, and we also care about communities. In a rapidly changing world, practitioners can guide young people and communities toward desirable outcomes through reflective planning and informed practice. Keys include recognizing how the work we currently do builds social capital, and how becoming more intentional about creating environments and shaping systems to prioritize relationships and connections can lead to greater social capital.

Institutions in society build social capital, explains Harvard sociologist Mario Luis Small (2009) in his book *Unanticipated Gains*. The interesting dilemma is that almost all do so by coincidence. Only the very few do so by design, or on purpose.

Youth development programs, such as the Land-Grant University System's 4-H youth development program, reach into the lives of children and youth in rural, urban, and suburban communities in all 50 of the United States, and numerous territories and countries around the globe.

***All institutions in society build social capital. Only a few do so with intentionality (Small, 2009). We believe 4-H professionals and programs can do more to build social capital on purpose, and with all youth and communities.***

The 4-H program involves youth-adult partnerships that encourage active participation by youth and adults in their communities, often over many years. Enabling youth to form optimal trajectories towards active contribution to community is a key outcome of 4-H programs and a marker of community health that requires renewal in each generation (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Research has shown social capital to be an important component in positive youth development, and the presence of social capital is a predictor of continuing



## Section 1 - Introduction



civic engagement and community development (Agnitsch, Flora & Ryan, 2006). Only poverty has greater influence than access to social capital on child well-being (Ferguson, 2000). Social capital involves connections among individuals

and social networks, norms of trust, and reciprocity that grow out of them. Two central tenets of social capital are that *relationships matter* and *social networks have value* (Fisher & Fisher, 2018; Chazdon et al., 2013). Relational assets are fundamental to the healthy development of all young people and communities.

As the nation's largest youth development organization, 4-H is well-positioned to help all youth develop relationships, networks, and connectedness that help them and their communities thrive. However, not all youth have the same access to social networks and relationships to realize their full potential. We believe 4-H can become more purposeful about building social capital among youth and communities, especially with a renewed focus on diversity, equity and inclusion of all youth.

Every young person deserves opportunities to build and sustain positive bonds with people and institutions which help them and their communities to thrive, and to work toward a better world. If there was ever a time to focus on the meaning and value of relationships in the lives of young people and communities, it is now in the wake of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken a serious toll on the social and emotional health, and most certainly altered the course of life for young people.

This Toolkit has been compiled by the North Central Extension & Research Activity

215 (NCERA 215) team to provide youth and community development professionals with a guide to design and deliver programming that builds youth and community social capital on purpose. Spanning over two years in the making, the Toolkit is a compilation of research, best practices, practitioner wisdom and decades of experience from across the country.

### Background and Research Questions

In 2010, a team of Extension youth development and community development practitioners from several states discovered a common interest in further exploring the connections between 4-H program practices and building stronger communities. The team constructed a research agenda and received formal recognition for it from the National Information Management and Support System (NIMSS) of the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The North Central Extension & Research Activity 215 (NCERA 215) project was entitled "Contribution of 4-H Participation to the Development of Social Capital within Communities."

From the beginning, the NCERA 215 team has been interested in investigating the public value of the 4-H program's presence in communities—in particular, how 4-H creates and strengthens social bonds for both youth and adults, to the benefit of the entire community. We have focused on how individual youth development and community development are associated with social capital built through 4-H. The research questions we have explored are:

1. What 4-H program experiences contribute to the development of youth social capital? What are the characteristics of programs that build bonding, bridging, and linking social capital?
2. How does the 4-H program's community involvement impact the development of social capital within the community?



## Section 1 - Introduction

### Goals and Organization of the Toolkit

This toolkit is a compilation of what we have learned through our research. The toolkit is designed to help you develop a better understanding of social capital within the 4-H youth development context, and to design program experiences that more purposefully strengthen youth and community social capital. Building social capital can be viewed and approached differently, depending on the discipline and context (Claridge, 2004). Thus, it is within the 4-H youth development context that we explore how current 4-H programming contributes to social capital development. We identify relationship-building strategies, and best practices for intentionally building networks and connectedness that support thriving youth and communities.

The Toolkit builds upon our first 4-H Social Capital Toolkit published in 2019, which introduced how social capital fits within the conceptual frameworks of 4-H youth development, community development and social justice. It introduced promising program practices and tools the team developed to measure social capital through the service-learning experiences of 4-H youth. It also served to spark conversations at multiple levels about the importance of social capital within 4-H, and from an equity standpoint, why we must be intentional about building it into how we evaluate our impact on youth and communities. This toolkit serves a purpose similar to the first toolkit, to provide a basis for discussion and planning for youth and community practitioners.

You will find links to emerging conceptual frameworks like The 4-H Thriving Model, as well as tools you can use for personal reflection, program design, and application of best practices to your work. The goal of this resource is for readers to apply tools and learning to enhance the overall quality of youth and community development programming. We aim to further the goals of engagement, opportunity, and equity for all youth as outlined in the National 4-H Strategic Plan 2025 (National 4-H Council, 2016).

The Toolkit is organized into the following sections:

**Section 1 – Introduction:** This section introduces readers to the Toolkit with background information, research questions, and the goals of the authors in compiling this resource for youth and community practitioners. It also details how the Toolkit is organized and includes descriptions of each section.

**Section 2 – Key Terms:** This section describes key terms and concepts found in the Toolkit as applied to the work of youth and community development professionals.

**Section 3 – The Role of Youth Development Professionals:** This section helps readers explore how their roles, decisions, and competencies as professionals shape programming and influence organizational and community environments which contribute to the formation of youth and community social capital.

**Section 4 – What is Social Capital:** This section provides a brief background on social capital theory. Readers will gain an understanding of three various forms (bonding, bridging and linking), and how building stocks of social capital benefits individual youth as well as whole communities. Additionally, a general overview is provided of the social inequities and barriers young people face, and how near-peers, adult mentors, and inclusive communities can provide more adequate supports and equitable access for all 4-H members.

**Section 5 – Why Building Social Capital Benefits Youth, Organizations, and Communities:** This section helps readers reflect on why programs should seek to grow social capital “on purpose.” We present three important positive youth development outcomes as reasons why practitioners should incorporate social capital as a priority outcome in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Finally, we explore why this focus benefits individual youth, organizations, and entire communities.



## Section 1 - Introduction

**Section 6 – Finding Social Capital within Foundational Frameworks:** This section identifies connections between social capital, social justice, and youth and

community development frameworks. More specifically, it links social capital to conceptual frameworks and research on the 4-H Thriving Model, Social Mobility, Social Justice Youth Development, and the Community Capitals Framework. Linkages between frameworks occur at the nexus of youth development and community development, and bring purposeful youth

and community social capital building into sharper focus.

### Section 7 – Becoming Ecosystem

**Builders for Social Capital:** This section explores how professionals can become intentional ecosystem builders for youth and community social capital within their respective levels of organizational leadership and responsibility. It identifies specific strategies professionals can use to elevate relational assets for youth and their communities. It helps readers relate best practices for creating a culture that fosters networks and connectedness at all levels to support thriving youth and communities.

**Section 8 – Evaluating Social Capital:** This section provides an overview of assessment tools used by this team and others to measure social capital in youth programs. It relates methods and techniques for gathering social capital-related data from youth and adults. It also includes a call for additional research and the development of new measurement tools to evaluate youth and community social capital.

### Section 9 – Social Capital Program Planning and Reporting Template:

This section provides readers with a template for integrating social capital elements into new or existing programs. The template can serve as a resource for practitioners throughout the program planning, development, and evaluation process. A sample program description which demonstrates use of the template is included.

### Section 10 – Methods and Tools for Building Social Capital:

Professionals can access resources for social capital reflection, assessment, program planning and design, as well as building awareness and facilitating greater understanding of social capital among key stakeholders. This section highlights resources that can be applied to programming with youth, adult staff and volunteers, groups, and communities, including Ripple Effects Mapping and Public Value.

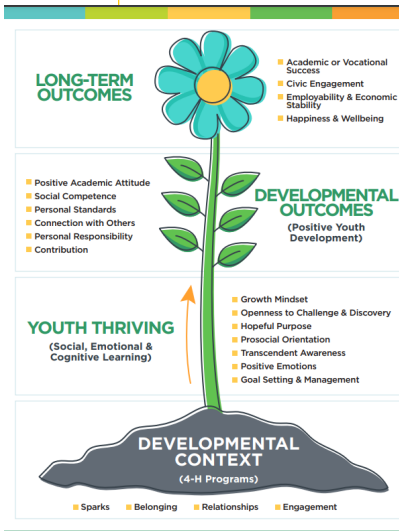
### Section 11 – Resources for Youth and Community Development Professionals:

This section features NCERA 215 team products, presentations and publications as resources youth and community development professionals can access to inform audiences, build awareness, and communicate the value of social capital from their work.

### Section 12 – Summary and Conclusion:

This section provides a summary of the Toolkit concepts and tools to explore, assess, plan, build, measure, reflect, and improve purposeful social capital building for youth and communities. It also includes information about how to become involved in further research, instrument development, and informed practice with our NCERA 215 team.

**Section 13 - Works Cited:** This section includes comprehensive citations for the references, tools, and resources highlighted in the Toolkit.



The 4-H Thriving Model illuminates a path for how youth can grow and flourish (Arnold, 2018)





## Section 2

# Key Terms

This section describes key terms and concepts found in the Toolkit and applied to the work of youth and community development professionals.

**Agency:** youth perceived self-efficacy regarding their belief that they can make a difference in the community. (see Section 8)

**Bonding:** connections that are close trusting relationships with people like us who share common backgrounds and interests, which are key to successful inclusion, as in bonding networks (Erickson & Benton, 2019). (see Section 4)

**Bonding Engagement:** the degree to which youth feel supported in their communities, schools, and social environments. (see Section 8)

**Bonding Network:** represents youth's sense of belonging to particular groups (see Section 8).

**Bonding Trust:** relates to youth's trust in people from defined groups within the youth's life or social circles. (see Section 8)

**Bridging:** connections that are weaker ties or horizontal linkages to people different from us who have diverse backgrounds or interests, who provide access to resources, as in bridging networks (Erickson & Benton, 2019). (see Section 4)

**Bridging Trust:** relates to youth's trust in people from different social backgrounds. (see Section 8)

**Community Capitals Framework (CCF):** conceptual framework that identifies resources and characteristics associated with successful and sustainable communities. CCF views communities as holistic systems made up of stocks of assets—natural, built, human, social, political, cultural, and financial capital (Emery & Flora, 2006). (see Section 6)

**Community Social Capital:** stocks of relational assets, linkages, and connections of all members or residents, which when added together, contribute to community well-being and vitality. (see Section 4)

**Developmental Relationships:** a close relationship between an adult and a young person that positively and powerfully shapes a young person's mindset and identity. (see Section 6)

**Ecological Model:** framework that helps examine the many effects and connectedness of social elements of the development of youth (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). (see Section 1)



## Section 2 – Key Terms

**Effective Brokers:** one who arranges, facilitates or negotiates on behalf of another, in this context, adult staff or volunteers who purposefully arrange relationship and network connections to build social capital benefitting youth and communities. (see Section 3)

**Front Line Workers:** staff and volunteers who work directly with youth, have direct contact and interactions with young people, and have a direct role in implementation of programs. (see Section 3)

**Individual Actors:** persons who exercise key influence in the lives of young people, in this context adult staff, volunteers, and older youth in the 4-H program. (see Section 3)

**Institutional Practices:** programmatic, organizational, or community methods and activities, in this context which either serve to support or to constrain youth and communities building social capital. (see Section 3)

**Linking:** connections with people who provide vertical linkages and access to

power, political influence, or financial resources at the individual level, community level, or beyond (Erickson & Benton, 2019). (see Section 4)

**Linking Trust:** relates to youth's trust in organizations and institutions. (see Section 8)

**Linking Engagement:** relates to the degree to which youth engage in organizational or community events. (see Section 8)

**Linking Barriers:** youth's perceived obstacles to participation and involvement in their community. (see Section 8)

**Bridging Engagement:** relates to frequency within the last month that youth spent interacting with people from different social groups. (see Section 8)

**Middle Managers:** individuals engaged in development and evaluation of programs, supervision of frontline workers and volunteers, and implementation of policy. (see Section 3)

**Near-Peers:** individuals who interact with young people on the basis of being very similar to them in age, background, or recent experiences. (see Section 4)

**Networks:** links between groups of people or individuals. (see Section 4)

**Positive Youth Development:** the ongoing process in which all young people are engaged in meeting their physical, personal and social needs and in building a set of skills and competencies that seem useful in their present lives and in the future (Pittman, 2018). (see Section 1)

**Program Quality Context:** settings of youth programs that follow principles of program quality, like a sense of belonging that ensures youth grow and thrive. (see Section 6)

**Public Value:** the value a program or community initiative





## Section 2 – Key Terms

contributes to broader society. All members of a community or society realize benefits from a collective effort, versus benefits only accruing to an individual or limited group. (see Section 8)

**Ripple Effects Mapping:** a participatory evaluation method that involves members of a group in capturing the impacts of a program or community initiative in order to better understand complex and collaborative processes. (see Section 8)

**Social Capital:** relationships and social networks of young people with other youth and adults in their communities and around the world, which help them access and mobilize resources that support their development. Social capital is a concept that bridges youth development and community development. (see Section 4)

**Social Mobility:** movement or shift in an individual young person's social status or position over time. (see Section 6)

**Social Network Analysis:** the measurement and mapping of actors (individuals, organizations) and relationships (connections, resource flows) between them in order to understand social structure. (see Section 8)

**Spiraling Down:** communities seeing various stocks of community capitals compound in loss and decline, following a sudden adverse event or an extended period of disinvestment or neglect (often associated with the erosion of bonding and bridging social capital) (Emery & Flora, 2006). (see Section 6)



**Spiraling Up:** communities seeing various stocks of community capitals begin to build upon one another, following a process of identifying community capitals and strategically investing, creating, and expanding stocks of capitals; often associated with bonding and bridging social capital (Emery & Flora, 2006). (See Section 6)

**System Leaders:** individuals who develop middle managers and frontline workers, provide administration and oversight of major program areas, organizational systems, budgets, resources, and policy (see Section 3)

**The 4-H Thriving Model:** a conceptual model predicting that youth participating in 4-H programs which provide a high quality developmental context will thrive and progress on a trajectory toward key youth development outcomes (Arnold, 2018). (see Section 6)

**Youth Sparks:** passions, talents, and interests of young people that energize and inspire them toward positive development. (see Section 6)