



Social Capital: Cultivating Community Connections in Maine



A key ingredient for creating social capital is providing space where people can come together. The Skatepark Lewiston-Auburn Movement encourages gatherings at the new skateboard park in Kennedy Park.

"The relationships and actions that result from a sense of greater community connectedness are at the heart of an important concept called 'social capital.'"

— Dr. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of the American Community*

To have strong communities, you must make communities strong.

This concept lies at the heart of the Maine Community Foundation's work. Since 1983, the foundation has sought to increase the capacity of Maine communities to seize opportunities and overcome challenges. We have targeted specific issues and community concerns and made long-term investments in leadership development, civic engagement and network building.

MaineCF's work with social capital affirms the fundamental role that relationships and citizen involvement play in building strong communities. Loosely defined as the networks and norms that arise through greater community connectedness, social capital is a core component of sustainable and prosperous communities.

In pursuing its work, the foundation relies on a network of volunteer regional and county committees throughout the state. These advisors enhance our understanding of local issues and provide an important bridge between donors and communities. They are critical partners in our efforts to increase social capital in Maine.

The Maine Community Foundation and the county and regional advisors invite you to join us in applying social capital concepts to efforts that nurture and sustain strong communities.

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The mission of the Maine Community Foundation is to strengthen Maine by working in partnership with donors and community groups.

A SNAPSHOT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The Maine Community Foundation participated in the 2006 Social Capital Community Survey in partnership with Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar. Conducted in 22 communities around the country, the survey offers a snapshot of community relationships and involvement across the United States.

In MaineCF's survey, a representative sample of 500 Androscoggin County residents answered questions about their community relationships and trust, giving and volunteering, faith-based engagement, civic involvement and political participation. Responses to this survey were compared to results from a similar study conducted in 2000 and to nationwide survey results for the same years.



Community gardens create opportunities for social interactions – and hard work – at one of the 15 gardens managed by Lots to Gardens in Lewiston.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS IN ANDROSCOGGIN COUNTY

The 2006 survey results indicate positive change in a number of areas. Average residents go to church more often than they did in 2000. They give more to charitable causes, volunteer more and boast a more racially diverse cohort of friends than six years ago. These men and women also continue to be more involved in the political process than their counterparts across the country.

Other components of social capital have remained constant, with the exception of interracial trust, which has declined. Thus, in many ways the typical Androscoggin County resident is more connected and involved than in 2000 and, in other ways, less so. More detailed information can be found in the accompanying "Results at a Glance" and on the foundation's website, www.mainecef.org.



Kitchen volunteers at the Festival FrancoFun establish intergenerational bonds while preparing and serving food at this lively annual gathering in Lewiston-Auburn.

"This data provides an opportunity to appreciate where the social fabric of our community is strong. It also compels us to consider where additional collective action is necessary to build on the economic and community successes of the past several years."

— John Jenkins, Mayor,
City of Auburn, & member, MaineCF
Androscoggin County Committee

TRANSLATING RESULTS INTO ACTION

Communities throughout the country have used the results of the Social Capital Community Survey to spark local action. Activities include:

- Channeling philanthropic resources in support of nonprofit organizations that bring diverse groups of people together and encourage greater community involvement
- Establishing public/private partnerships to encourage and strengthen networks among different types of organizations and individuals
- Investing in education and leadership development
- Launching a campaign to promote civility and more respectful communication among citizens
- Using survey data to assess the social impacts of major development initiatives.

The Maine Community Foundation will use its survey data to inform grantmaking by its regional and county committees. Other activities will result from local discussions about the significance of, and appropriate response to, the survey findings. MaineCF will also look to donor advisors for their continued support of projects that have significant potential to strengthen community networks and citizen involvement.



Third-graders from Sherwood Heights School in Auburn join the cast of Dickens' A Christmas Carol on stage at the Public Theatre.



A performance by the Chinese Folk Art Ensemble at the Franco-American Cultural Center introduces a Maine audience to a special cultural experience.



Business people and public officials play an important role in building social capital. Young People of the Lewiston-Auburn Area helps to promote involvement in Androscoggin County.

"Since 2000, the Maine Community Foundation has provided over \$65,000 to arts organizations like L/A Arts and the Franco-American Heritage Center in Androscoggin County. This funding combined with other significant public and private support of the arts may be part of the reason that we see a noticeable increase in the average resident's attendance at cultural events and involvement with arts organizations."

— Dr. Betty Robinson,
faculty member, University of
Southern Maine/Lewiston-Auburn
College & member, MaineCF Board

“Helping communities preserve and build strong relationships, particularly as they become increasingly diverse, and cope with changing economic and social realities is at the heart of much of our work. The Social Capital Community Survey makes it clear that these issues are not mutually exclusive and provides insight into how we can work together to address them more effectively in the future.”

— Henry Schmelzer, President
Maine Community Foundation



Community events like a Tinpannic Steel Band concert organized by L/A Arts in Lewiston bring people together in fun and interactive way.

BUILDING BRIDGES AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

At its core, social capital is about relationships. *Bonding* social capital is what we build with our immediate social networks, and people with whom we already have a lot in common. *Bridging* social capital is getting to know people who are different.

There are a variety of formal and informal activities that individuals, organizations and communities can do to strengthen bonds, build bridges and foster greater community engagement. Here are some questions to consider when assessing the potential of a particular project to build social capital in your community:

- Does the project bring people together in a way that is fun?
- Does the project help residents come together to discuss and address key community issues?
- Does the project strengthen local leadership or build new relationships among leaders from different parts of the community?
- Does the project engage and connect people who are least likely to have strong social networks or high levels of community involvement?
- Does the project challenge stereotypes and promote understanding of others in a safe and constructive manner?
- To what extent are the people who will benefit from the project involved in its planning, implementation and evaluation?
- To what extent does the project promote volunteerism or link volunteers to opportunities?
- To what extent does the project seek to address underlying issues that effect community engagement and trust?

Get involved and find out more about how you can support projects that build social capital by contacting the Maine Community Foundation.

Photos courtesy Skatepark Lewiston-Auburn Movement (Lewiston Sun Journal), Young People of the Lewiston-Auburn Area, Lots to Gardens, Franco-American Cultural Center, The Public Theatre and L/A Arts. The Maine Community Foundation and its Androscoggin County Fund have funded projects by these nonprofits and other community groups committed to strengthening communities.