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SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE
(Sense of Community, Social Compact, and Social Capital)

> The **social infrastructure** includes the activities, organizations, and facilities that support a community's need to form and maintain social interactions and relationships—its social capital.
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> **Social capital** is a social network, the reciprocities that come about from inter-relationships among members of that network, and the value of these relationships for achieving mutual goals.[1]
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> The **social compact** is an implicit understanding that we are "all in it together"—the many private and public commitments and bonds that hold families, businesses, communities, and the nation together.
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> **Sense of community** is a feeling members have of "belonging," a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.[2]

Planners, policymakers, community leaders, and citizens are increasingly interested in elements associated with creating *livable communities*—such as: housing and community development models that support the ability of various population groups to successfully age in place, innovative zoning strategies, street design, accessible transportation, strategies that promote social interaction across all age groups, efforts that involve citizens in civic engagement activities, and others.

As New York demographer Robert Scardamalia's article in this *Resource Manual* points out, demographics explains an important part of the growing interest in such models and strategies. However, other significant forces are also at play; a scan of community actions across the country finds that emphasis on these models and strategies is also a response to:
* Influences that are eroding the social compact;
* Forces that are wearing away a sense of community in American neighborhoods; and
* A mismatch between the changing nature of aging in America and the roles and expectations for various age groups (that is, use of a community's social capital).

Social Compact and a Sense of Community

The emerging, somewhat urgent interest in creating livable communities is driven by a variety of cultural and social forces, including the desire to strengthen the

social infrastructure of communities and to find meaningful roles that utilize the social capital of today's and tomorrow's communities. Many feel that the social compact is frayed. This compact is fundamental to social vitality and economic progress; and many feel that, during the past three decades, more forces have been at play in weakening this compact.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam suggests that, in contrast to the first two-thirds of the 20th century, "we have been pulled apart from one another and from communities" in the final third of that century.[3] While not all trends point to an undermining of the social compact, many important shifts are contributing to its fraying. For example, former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, points to declines in support for social insurance and public education, as well as strains in the traditional commitments of employers to their employees (as exemplified in the erosion of work-based health benefits and pension plans).[4] Increasingly, income and wealth have become less equally distributed. Political and cultural wars of the past two decades have alienated many citizens from each other and from the nation's political process. Short-term opportunism in the economic arena (for example, the proliferation of sub-prime mortgages) has placed many at great risk, a further indication of the erosion of traditional regard for the public's well-being.

The community development models and approaches described in the *Livable New York "Resource Manual"* provide a heartening indication of the potential to build upon a community's reservoir of social capital and reinforce the social compact. For example, architectural designs, housing and transportation models, community planning approaches that provide for social spaces and interactions among community members, inclusive community participation, public safety measures, useable and accessible amenities, and efficient use of resources all support the growing interest in strengthening a community's social infrastructure, thereby creating livable communities and reinforcing community well-being for all members.

Movement toward employing such strategies to strengthen a sense of community and the social compact are evident in various places across the country; for example:

- Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) are apartment buildings or geographic areas that were designed for people of all ages, but which have, over time, evolved to include a substantial proportion of elderly people—due to residents' aging in place or the in-migration of older people because of its appeal as a retirement location. In New York City, incorporation of a coordinated program of education, services, and activities in apartment buildings that have evolved into a NORC supports the ability and desire of aging residents to remain living in their long-time apartment homes and promotes successful interaction among residents of all ages.
- The city of Santa Cruz, CA, uses Accessible Dwelling Units (accessory apartments and elder cottages) to address their affordable housing shortage for people of all ages, as well as an option to enable elderly residents to age in place and remain close to family members.
- Westchester County, NY, has made strides in planning and creating a county-wide "community for all ages" by tapping into the social capital resource of their

diversely aged population, resulting in a network of 15 communities, with each committed to the "belief that the aging of the population is opening up opportunities for a wide range of people (ages and cultures) to think differently and act differently" and to build "inclusive constituencies for neighborhood/community change."[5]

- An intentional intergenerational community—Hope Meadows in Chicago, IL— exemplifies a strong "sense of community." This community for all ages specifically includes families with children adopted from foster care. The community offers rent subsidies and home maintenance assistance to elderly residents (honorary grandparents) in exchange for their volunteer services.[6]

Structural Lag in the Roles of All Age Groups

America has seen dramatic changes in the profile of its age structure, including increased life-expectancy and sustained physical capacities at older ages; and the country has seen changes in household structures, family life, science, life-stage patterns (education, work, and retirement), and productivity. Social expectations and roles are lagging well behind these changes.[7] The traditional life trajectory— education for the young, work and raising children for young/middle-aged adults, and retirement/leisure for older people—does not match the reality of 21st century America's living patterns. For example: In contrast to previous times, individuals today engage in continuous life-long learning or multiple educational activities throughout adulthood. They assume second, third, and fourth careers and take bridge jobs or substantial volunteer opportunities following traditional "retirement." Required community service activities are now incorporated into the curricula for elementary, secondary, and college students. People of all ages are assuming unexpected responsibilities at unpredicted times of life—such as the growing number of grandparents raising grandchildren and the increasing number of teenagers providing substantial caregiving tasks for elderly grandparents. Such shifting patterns and norms challenge traditional life-course expectations and customs. The models, strategies, and approaches that are characteristic of the movement to create livable communities and strengthen a community's social infrastructure can support the impact of changing community profiles and shifting norms and life patterns.

Generativity

As people approach traditional retirement age, they are faced with the challenges and opportunities of a new period of life—what some refer to as the "third age," a period in which many child-rearing and employment responsibilities are fulfilled or reduced and in which many are faced with decisions about new directions they may *wish* to take or *have* to take, contributions they may wish to make, and new goals they may wish to achieve. As people enter the third age of their lives, they often have a desire to give back to the community—fulfilling a quest for "generativity"— what Erik Erikson described as "a concern for guiding and paving the way for future generations."[8] Opportunities for volunteering or other civic engagement activities are an important aspect of a livable community, and generativity is often a driving force in these activities among the elderly population. Older generations care about

what happens to younger generations; they want to build a better community for their children and grandchildren—a critical motivation for strengthening the social compact.

The benefits to communities of engaging older people in civic engagement, volunteering activities, and paid opportunities accrue across all age groups and institutions. For example, volunteer models such as Experience Corps recognize the assets inherent in the third age and the value gained in combining generations. Experience Corps trains elder individuals to work in the school system with underserved children, benefitting not only the students receiving the service, but the children's families, the school's personnel, and the older adults who provide the service.[9] Generation United's *Senior4kids* initiative has engaged persons aged 50 and over in creating five statewide networks (including New York) of community leaders and grassroots volunteers to advocate for high-quality child care and pre-kindergarten education.[10]

Through these and many other programs and activities, older adults utilize their time in a manner that is beneficial for future generations and for the wider community, as well as for enhancing their own sense of competence, dignity, and self-worth. In addition, older adults model roles for younger people (who will eventually age into old age), passing along life lessons to ensure the well-being of generations to come. The constant exchange of services among generations within families and within society is both an expression and a re-enforcement of the social compact—a circle linking generations and community sectors.[11]

Conclusion

New York's communities can benefit significantly from understanding the value in the recent trends taking place across the country to strengthen communities. As neighborhood profiles evolve and social norms and behaviors shift, communities can choose to shape the way their residents live, work, and grow and the way community members relate to one another—creating a New York that is *livable* for all residents and all sectors.

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