

Public Services and Government

Exploring dimensions of social capital in Scotland Findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and Scottish Household survey

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There is considerable current interest in assets-based approaches to health and development and in engaging individuals and communities in decisions about services. Both rely on the existence of social capital. High levels of social capital are also associated with a range of positive outcomes for individuals and communities. This paper explores whether different groups in Scottish society experience different levels of social capital. It draws on data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) 2009 and the Scottish Household survey (SHS) 2010. In defining and measuring social capital, it uses the ONS social capital framework, which examines social capital across five dimensions: social networks and social support; reciprocity and trust; civic participation; views of the local area; and social participation.

Main Findings

- The distribution of social capital varies significantly across different socio-economic and demographic groups in Scotland.
- Three key factors were significantly associated with differing levels of social capital across at least four of ONS's five dimensions:
 - People living in rural (particularly remote rural) areas consistently indicated higher levels of social capital compared with those in large urban areas. For example, 51% of those in remote rural areas, compared with 20% in large urban areas, said they regularly stop and speak to people in their area.
 - People living in the least deprived areas of Scotland had higher levels of social capital than those in the most deprived areas. For example, 65% of those in the least deprived areas of Scotland said most people can be trusted, compared with 31% in the most deprived areas.
 - People who are educated to degree level generally had higher levels of social capital, particularly in comparison with those with no educational qualifications. For example, 56% of people with degrees compared with 33% of those with no qualifications had done something active to register their views on an issue in the past few years.
- Patterns of social capital by age were not uniform and varied depending on the aspect of social capital in question. For example, those aged over 65 were more likely than those under 30 to say they regularly stop and speak to people in their area. However, older people were significantly less likely than younger people to want to be more involved in decisions their council makes that affect their local area. Younger people, aged 18–29, were the age group most likely to feel that anti-social behaviour was a problem in their area.

Introduction

The concept of ‘social capital’ provides a framework for exploring a variety of individual and community-based assets which researchers and activists have argued can improve people’s lives through creating resilience, building trust and improving physical and mental well-being. Indeed, research evidence shows that high levels of social capital are associated with a range of positive outcomes for individuals and/or communities, including better health and wellbeing, lower crime rates and higher educational achievement. While there are several definitions of social capital, key elements include strong social networks, shared norms and trust. Social capital can exist between family and close friends (bonding capital), people with more distant ties, such as work colleagues (bridging capital) and people outwith someone’s own community (including service providers – linking capital).

Supporting strong, resilient communities (of place or interest) with high levels of social capital is central to many of the Scottish Government’s strategic objectives and national outcomes. There has been particular interest in recent years in building and using social capital to help address health inequalities (reflected in the current focus on ‘assets-based’ approaches). Greater involvement of people and communities in the design and delivery of the services is also a key objective of the current public service reform agenda, as outlined in *Renewing Scotland’s Public Services*, the Scottish Government’s response to the Christie Commission report.

About this paper

This paper summarises findings from a study which explores the level of social capital among different groups of people in Scottish society. It uses data from two sources – the 2009 Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) and the 2010 Scottish Household Survey (SHS). The study looks at variations in social capital across five dimensions, based on a framework for measuring social capital in the UK developed by ONS (Harper, 2002). These dimensions are:

- Social networks and social support
- Reciprocity and trust
- Civic participation (which includes involvement in local affairs and perceptions of ability to influence local issues)
- Views of the local area (identified as an important correlate of social capital), and

- Social participation (which includes volunteering, as well as membership of groups and clubs).

The analysis examined variations in different elements of social capital by key socio-demographic and area-based factors, including gender, age, education, income, socio-economic class, tenure, disability, whether people live in an urban or rural area and area deprivation.¹ It is important to note, however, that the statistical analysis in this paper cannot tell us that a particular factor causes lower or higher levels of social capital. All it can tell us is whether or not they are associated.

Social networks and support

Social networks are central to definitions of social capital. The relationships people have with others are both a source of support to them as individuals and key to enabling mutual cooperation towards shared outcomes. SSA 2009 asked people how strongly they agreed or disagreed that ‘I regularly stop and speak to people in my area’. Responses varied significantly between urban and rural areas, and by age, education and gender.

- 51% of those in remote rural areas agreed strongly that they regularly stop and speak to people in their area compared with only 20% of people living in large urban areas.
- 37% of those aged 65 or over agreed strongly that they regularly stop and speak to people in their area compared with 17% of 18–29 year olds.
- People with degrees were somewhat less likely than other groups to agree that they regularly stop and speak to people in their local area (67% agreed or strongly agreed compared with 74–78% of those with lower levels of qualification).
- Women were more likely to agree strongly that they regularly stop and speak to people in their area.

SSA 2009 also asked people how strongly they agreed or disagreed that ‘if my home was empty, I could count on one of my neighbours to look after it’. Views varied significantly by tenure: 92% of owner-occupiers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared with 75% of social renters and 66% of private renters.

Finally, SSA 2009 asked people how much they agreed or disagreed that ‘I feel there are people in this area I could turn to for advice and support’. Again, those

¹ Differences in social capital by ethnicity and religion could not be robustly explored due to small sample sizes for key sub-groups. Data on sexual orientation was not available in the data used for this study.

in remote rural areas were significantly more likely to agree with this statement (90%, compared with 67% in large urban areas). Those in the most deprived areas were less likely to feel they had someone to turn to locally (65%, compared with 82% of those in the least deprived areas).

Social trust

Trust is an essential component of building the relationships which are central to social capital. SSA 2009 respondents were asked 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'. Men, people living in less deprived areas and people in remote rural areas and remote small towns were all relatively more likely to say that most people can be trusted.

- 58% of men compared with 45% of women said most people can be trusted.
- 65% of those in the least deprived areas of Scotland compared with 31% in the most deprived said that most people can be trusted.
- 68% of those living in remote rural areas and 62% of those living in remote small towns felt that most can be trusted, compared with 46–48% of those in large or other urban areas.

Education was also significantly related to trust, although the pattern was not completely linear – 62% of those with degrees, compared with 40% of those with standard grade-level qualifications² and 45% of those with no qualifications felt most could be trusted.

Involvement in community and civic life (participation)

Social participation concerns involvement in groups around leisure, social activities or voluntary organisations. Analysis of the 2010 SHS indicates that participation in volunteering varies with education, whether people lived in an urban or rural area, class, gender and area deprivation.

- Participation in volunteering increased with level of education, from 15% among those with no qualifications to 43% among graduates.
- 47% of those in remote rural areas had volunteered in the last 12 months, compared with 28% of those in large urban areas and 29% in other urban areas.

- Employers managers and professionals were more likely than those in other socio-economic groups to have participated in volunteering (46% compared with 22–37% of other groups).
- 34% of women compared with 29% of men had volunteered in the last year.
- 17% of those in the most deprived areas of Scotland had volunteered in the last year, compared with 39% of those in the least deprived areas.

Analysis of SSA 2009 and SHS 2010 explored two aspects of civic participation: active involvement (both actual, and whether people would like to be more involved), and how empowered people feel to influence decisions locally. Respondents were asked:

- Whether or not they had done anything to register their views on an issue in the last few years (SSA 2009) – analysis focused on those who had done something 'active' to make their views known (that is, something beyond simply signing a petition or giving money to a charity or campaign)
- Whether they agreed or disagreed that 'It is just too difficult for someone like me to do much about improving my local area' (SSA 2009)
- Whether they agreed or disagreed that 'I can influence decisions affecting my local area' (SHS 2010), and
- Whether they agreed or disagreed that 'I would like to be more involved in the decisions my council makes that affect my local area' (SHS 2010).

Education was significantly associated with all four measures of civic participation. For example, 56% of people with degrees compared with only 33% of those with no recognised qualification had done something active to register their views in the past few years.

Age was significant for three of the four measures. However, the pattern by age varied between different measures.

- 40–64 year-olds were most likely to already be active in terms of civic participation – 48% had done something active to register their views, compared with 36–39% of those under 40.
- 30–39 year-olds were most likely to want to be more active in future – 46% (compared with 18% of those aged 65 or older) agreed that they would like to be more involved in council decisions affecting their local area.

² Scottish qualifications for students aged around 14–16.

- Both 18–29 year-olds and those aged 65 or older were more likely to feel disempowered with respect to their ability to influence decisions about their area. Fifty-two per cent of those aged 18–29 and 45% of those aged 65 and older, compared with 32–37% of those aged 30–64, agreed that ‘It is just too difficult for someone like me to do much about improving my local area’.

Other significant differences in relation to civic participation included:

- People living in remote rural areas, compared with people in all other types of areas, were more likely to feel empowered to influence local decisions and able to improve their local area.
- 42% of employers, managers and professionals compared with 19% of those in routine or semi-routine occupations disagreed that it was too difficult for them to do anything about improving their area.
- Those in less deprived areas were less likely than those in the most deprived areas to feel it was too difficult for them to improve their local areas.
- People with a long-standing illness or disability were more likely than those without a disability to have done something active to register their views (49% compared with 42% respectively).

Views of the local area

The final dimension in the ONS social capital framework relates to people’s views of their own local area. This could potentially cover a wide range of issues, but (for pragmatic reasons around data availability and existing analyses) this study focuses on perceptions of anti-social behaviour locally. Perceptions of how big a problem anti-social behaviour was in the local area varied significantly by deprivation, whether people live in an urban or rural area and by income.

- 35% of people in the least deprived areas of Scotland say that ASB is not a problem at all in their area, compared with only 11% of people in the most deprived areas.
- 47% of those in remote rural areas compared with between 18–22% of those in urban areas or accessible small towns reported that anti-social behaviour was not a problem at all locally.
- 28% of those with household incomes of £38,000 or more said anti-social behaviour was not a problem, compared with 19–21% of those on lower incomes.

Conclusions

This paper shows that people who are already socio-economically disadvantaged in society, by living in the most deprived areas of Scotland and having the lowest levels of education, are also less likely to have high levels of social capital to draw upon. In contrast, people in remote rural areas stand out as having particularly high levels of social capital. Life stage also appears as a significant factor in relation to three dimensions of social capital: social networks, civic participation and views of local area.

Policy initiatives that seek to engage with communities and to encourage and utilise social capital should perhaps examine whether the distributional patterns suggested in this analysis inform the capacity of the community to engage. Policy makers should look to better understand variations in social capital between different groups and places, how it is established and encouraged and whether the policy should take account of existing social capital distribution in its design and implementation.

Data and methods

The Scottish Household Survey (SHS) is commissioned by the Scottish Government. It measures the characteristics of households and individuals in Scotland. The Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) is an annual survey conducted by ScotCen social research, exploring social and political attitudes.

Both surveys are based on random probability sampling methods, designed to provide samples that are representative of the Scottish population. SSA 2009 had a sample size of 1,482. Questions on volunteering in SHS 2010 were asked of a sub-sample of 5,636 participants, while questions on influencing and involvement in decisions about the local area were asked of 9,020 participants.

Technical details on SSA 2009 are provided in the technical annex to Ormston, R (2010) *Scottish Social Attitudes survey 2009: Core module – attitudes to the government, the economy and public services in Scotland*, Scottish Government Social Research (available to download online). Technical details about the Scottish Household Survey are available from the Scottish Government website (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/16002>).

The findings discussed in this paper were informed by logistic regression analysis. Details of this analysis and full tables for all figures cited in this research findings are available in a separate full report.

References

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This document, along with the full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, or would like further copies of this research findings summary document or the full research report, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131-244 7560.

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