POVERTY SOLUTIONS
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# **THE POWER OF CONNECTIONS:** CULTIVATING SOCIAL CAPITAL TO DRIVE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN DETROIT

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## INTRODUCTION

Public policy discourse about poverty often starts and ends with a call to expand resources including post-secondary education, income supports, or workforce development opportunities. Although this approach is foundational to reducing material hardship and boosting income, researchers recognize it does not fully address what is needed to drive economic mobility.[1] In addition to policies and programs focused directly on economic success, individuals with low incomes also require social capital, or the resources we gain from our relationships.[2] An individual cashes in on her social capital by staying with a family member following an eviction, asking someone for a job reference, or borrowing a car from a cousin to get to a doctor's appointment. Research suggests social capital is particularly salient in the employment context, helping workers land their first jobs[3] or higher-paying jobs compared to those who find jobs through other means.[4]

**In Detroit, where 20% of residents in the labor force are unemployed and 30% of residents earn under $20,000 a year,[5] social service providers and policymakers should incorporate social capital development into new and existing programs designed to increase income, employment, and education.** Developing social capital as a strategy to reduce poverty in Detroit complements and enhances current initiatives aimed to boost employment equity and improve post-secondary education. Social capital helps a jobseeker hear about a new job training initiative, find a ride to get to orientation, and secure a reference when it's time to apply for a role. **In this brief, we explore how social capital operates in Detroit, highlight promising local initiatives, and recommend strategies for action.**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Social capital reduces hardship and improves access to resources in Detroit. Many residents make use of their relationships to give and receive material, informational, and emotional support. Compared to New York and Los Angeles residents, however, Detroiters are less likely to feel that neighbors are willing to help each other.[6]
- Structural factors—including a weak job market, widespread blight, school closures, and racial segregation—limit the amount of capital available within Detroit social networks, particularly the type of social capital that fuels upward economic mobility.
- Detroit's ecosystem of community-based organizations mitigates these structural barriers, and several local groups offer successful and innovative models for incorporating social capital development into social service delivery. Public and private funders should continue to invest in organizations pursuing these approaches.
- Given the urgency of alleviating economic hardship in Detroit, government, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders should integrate social capital building strategies into their existing economic and community development work. Leaders must connect residents to each other, in addition to connecting residents to programs. Strategies to grow social capital include: designing programming and hosting events to foster peer-to-peer connections, investing in open community spaces in every neighborhood, and increasing access to information.

## STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

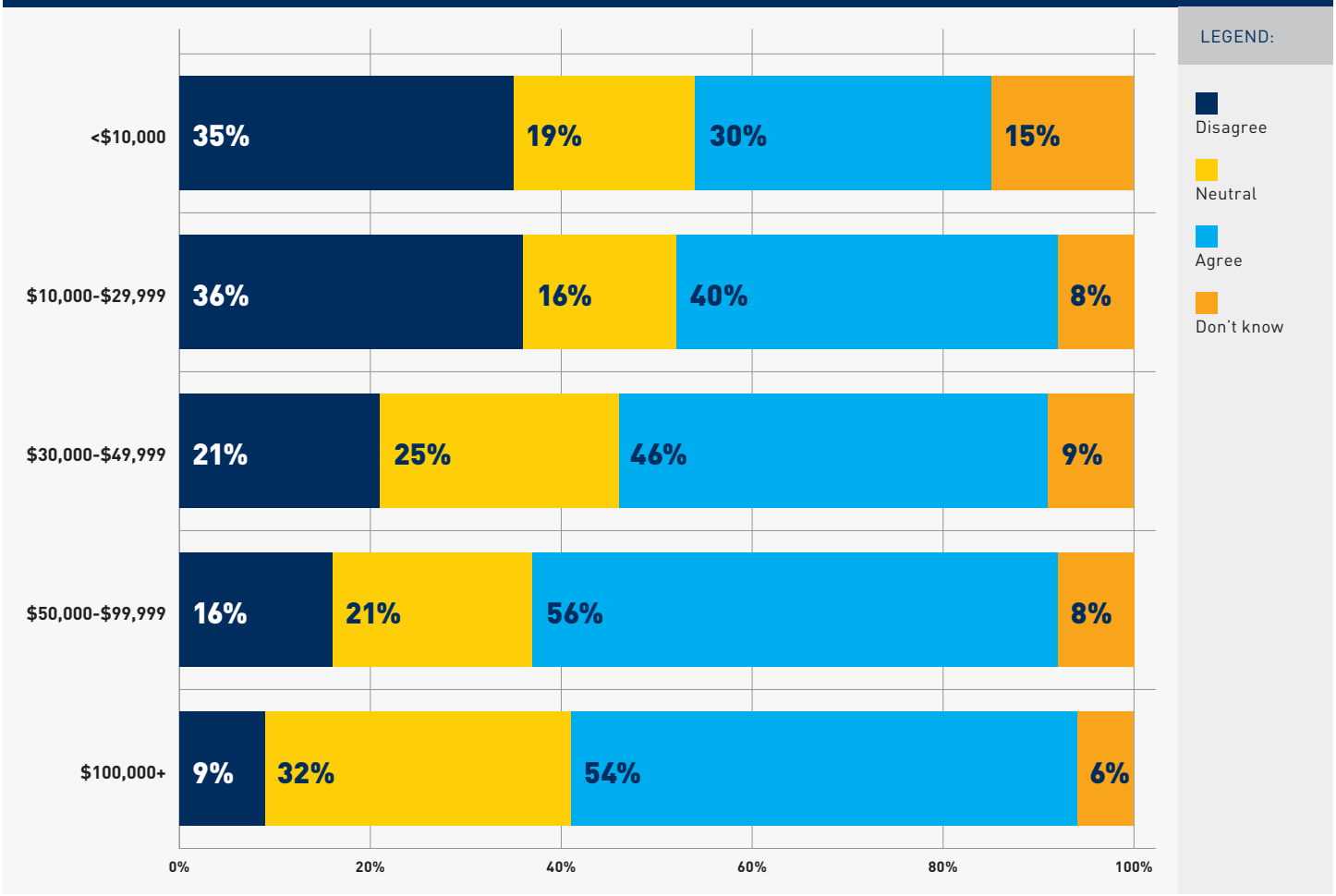
Social capital[7] has three main types:

- bonding, occurring between peers in the same group, such as friends or neighbors;
- bridging, occurring between individuals from groups that are dissimilar in some way, such as age, race, or socio-economic status; and
- linking, aligning individuals to institutions or people within institutions with relatively more power, such as the local government or school system.[8]

Trust is foundational to social capital, since "the belief in the integrity of other people" forms the basis of useful relationships.[9] **Yet a significant proportion of Detroiters do not trust their neighbors; when asked whether people in their neighborhood could be trusted, 1 in 4 Detroiters disagree.**

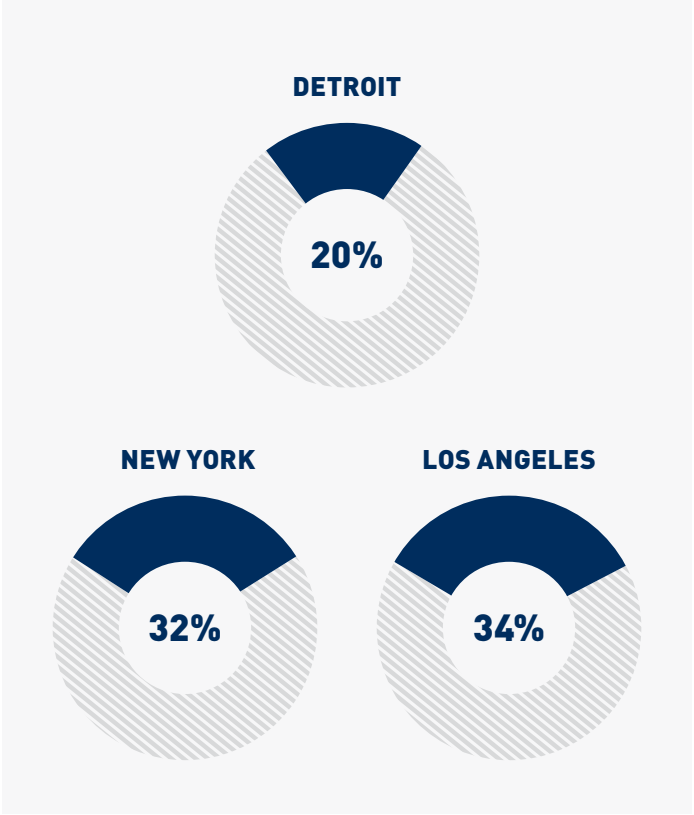
Residents with lower incomes are much more likely to distrust people in their neighborhood compared to residents with higher incomes (Figure 1).[10] A survey of Illinois households illustrates possible structural reasons for this phenomenon. The authors find residents who live in lower-income neighborhoods with higher levels of blighted buildings, graffiti, crime, and noise are more likely to mistrust others, compared to those in higher-income neighborhoods: "Visible signs of the breakdown of order may indicate to residents that the people who live around them are not concerned with public order and have little respect for other people or their property. In these neighborhoods, people understandably view those around them with suspicion."[11]

**FIGURE 1: PEOPLE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD CAN BE TRUSTED**



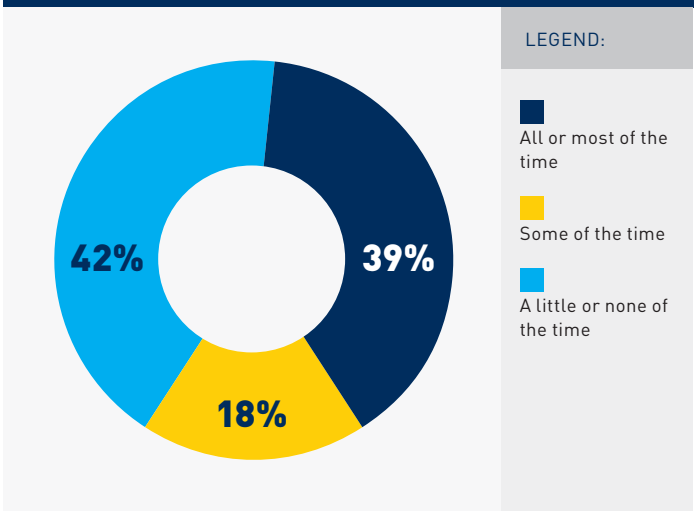

Source: Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. (Fall 2018). Wave 4 Survey: Blight, Housing, Neighborhoods.

**FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF RESIDENTS THAT BELIEVE NEIGHBORS WOULD HELP ONE ANOTHER, BY CITY**




Source: Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. (Summer 2018). Wave 3: Community Health.

**FIGURE 3: HOW OFTEN CAN YOU ASK SOMEONE TO LOAN YOU A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY WHEN YOU NEED IT?**




Source: Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. (Summer 2018). Wave 3: Community Health.

In addition to trust, social capital also requires some level of reciprocity, or exchanging benefits and favors with your connections, and the sense of obligation to do so.[12] However, just 20% of Detroit residents felt strongly that people in their neighborhood were willing to help their neighbors, compared to 32% of New York residents and 34% of Los Angeles residents (Figure 2).[13]

A small majority of Detroit residents report having access to some type of social capital, through connections that provide access to emotional support and a helping hand, according to the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study. **Fifty-seven percent of Detroiters say they have someone to confide in to talk about personal problems most or all the time, and 58% of Detroiters state they have someone to take them to the doctor most or all the time.**[14] However, 15% of residents say they have no one to confide in, and 19% say they would not be able to find support with daily chores if they were sick. Monetary support is even harder to come by. When asked how often they could ask someone to lend them a small amount of money if needed, 39% of residents said all or most of the time, while 42% said a little or none of the time (Figure 3).[15]

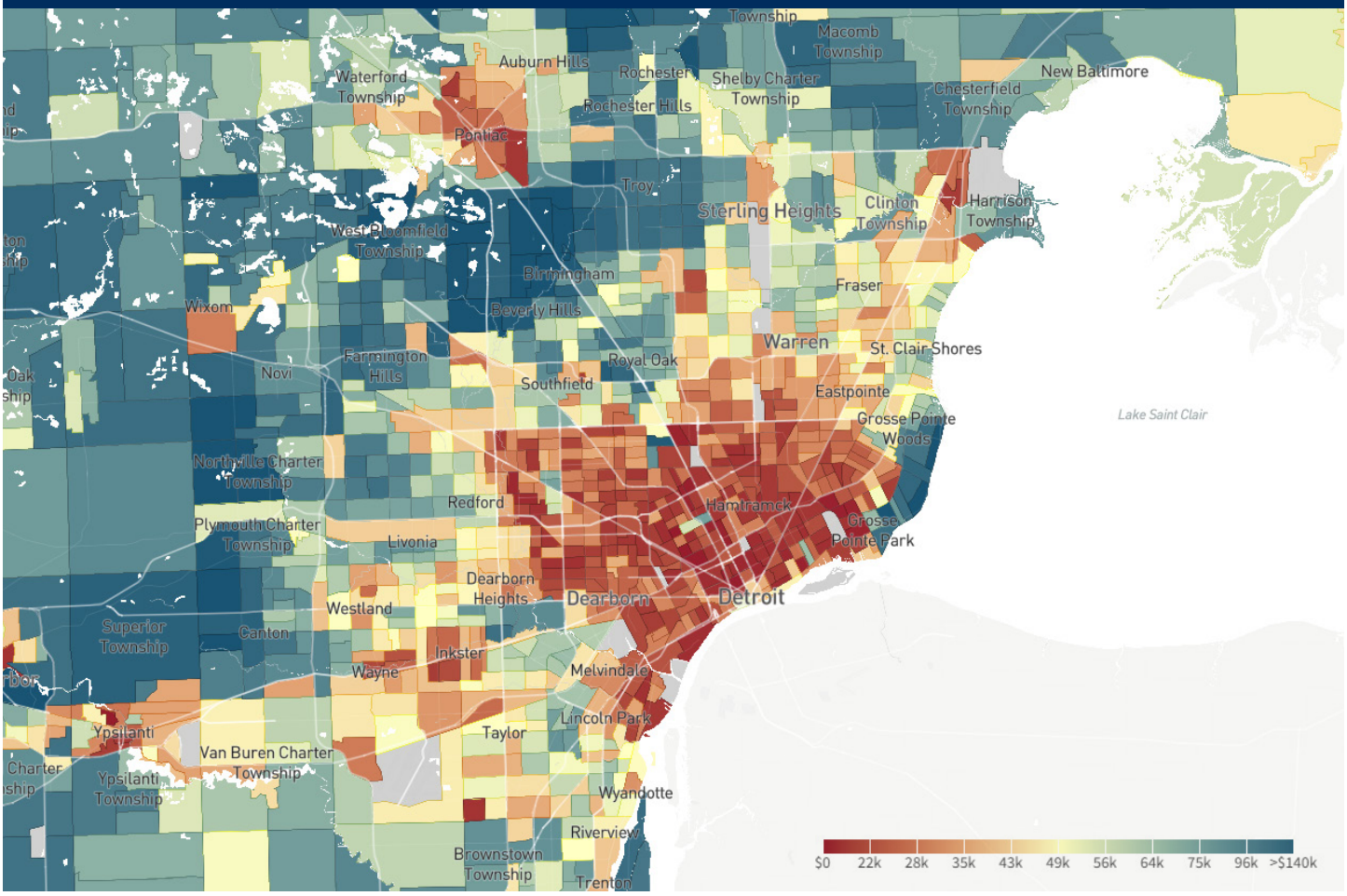
Once secured, social capital helps individuals "get by," facilitating access to resources that money would otherwise buy, like transportation, child care or durable goods like furniture or clothing.[16] As one community leader put it, "Sometimes cooperation and collaboration can bypass some real rough patches, because you're not dependent on [money], you're dependent on the community."[17] In her dissertation on Detroit's informal economy, Jen Satya Lendrum explores how many residents of one high-poverty neighborhood, facing significant and often multiple barriers to formal employment, leverage their personal relationships and connections with grassroots organizations to secure necessary resources. These residents generate income through services, home-based microenterprises, volunteering, or offering goods for exchange—which all require managing relationships with friends, family, and neighbors.[18] She describes the highly-networked income generating activities of one resident:

James conducted some informal work for a woman in the neighborhood. She explained that she needed help moving some furniture. In return for the completed work, she offered James three bikes, two of which he kept, the other he gave to a neighbor either as a gift or as a payment from a previous interaction. James also conducts volunteer work with one of the community organizations. For this otherwise unpaid work, James received a bed that had been donated to the organization as "pay." He, upon receipt of the item, sold it to someone else in the neighborhood for cash, $25.[19]

Connections can help an individual maintain stability, and they can also aid an individual's move up the economic ladder. **But in Detroit, the concentration of structural disadvantages—low-wage job markets, unaffordable higher education—makes it likely that one's family and friends are also disadvantaged, limiting access to social connections that could fuel upward mobility.**[20] As one resident searching for an IT job put it, "I don't really have nobody to talk to, to give me some good job leads [for the] type of thing I might want to do. Because you know, everybody I talk to … it's not very many people with high school diplomas."[21] A significant proportion of Detroiters are not working, and as such are not able to refer a friend or family member seeking work. Thirteen percent of adults in Detroit are unemployed, while 36% are not in the labor force at all.[22] Once on the job, some workers experience barriers to building relationships due to the isolating nature of certain kinds of low-wage work.[23] A home health aide caring for a single client at their home, for example, has little opportunity to connect with co-workers who might offer information about a position offering tuition reimbursement or better working conditions.

**Detroit's economic segregation from much of the region further limits residents' opportunities for contact with the diverse networks necessary to build bridging capital (Figure 4).**[24] In neighboring Oakland County, the median income is an estimated $81,000 compared to less than $33,900 in Detroit.[25] Similarly, education levels are significantly lower in Detroit than in surrounding cities. For example, 16.7% of Detroit residents over 25 years old have at least a bachelor's degree, while 37.7% of same-age residents in neighboring Southfield and 48.3% of neighboring Ferndale have a bachelor's degree or higher.[26] Certainly, city borders are permeable, and Detroiters travel to other cities and interact with others for work, school, and recreation, just as suburban residents commute into the city to fill those same needs. But for the nearly 1 in 3 Detroit households without cars, the absence of a robust regional transportation system makes it much more difficult to visit other communities in search of opportunity. [27]

**FIGURE 4: MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF RESIDENTS IN 2012-2016**




Source: U.S. Census Bureau and Opportunity Insights. The Opportunity Atlas.

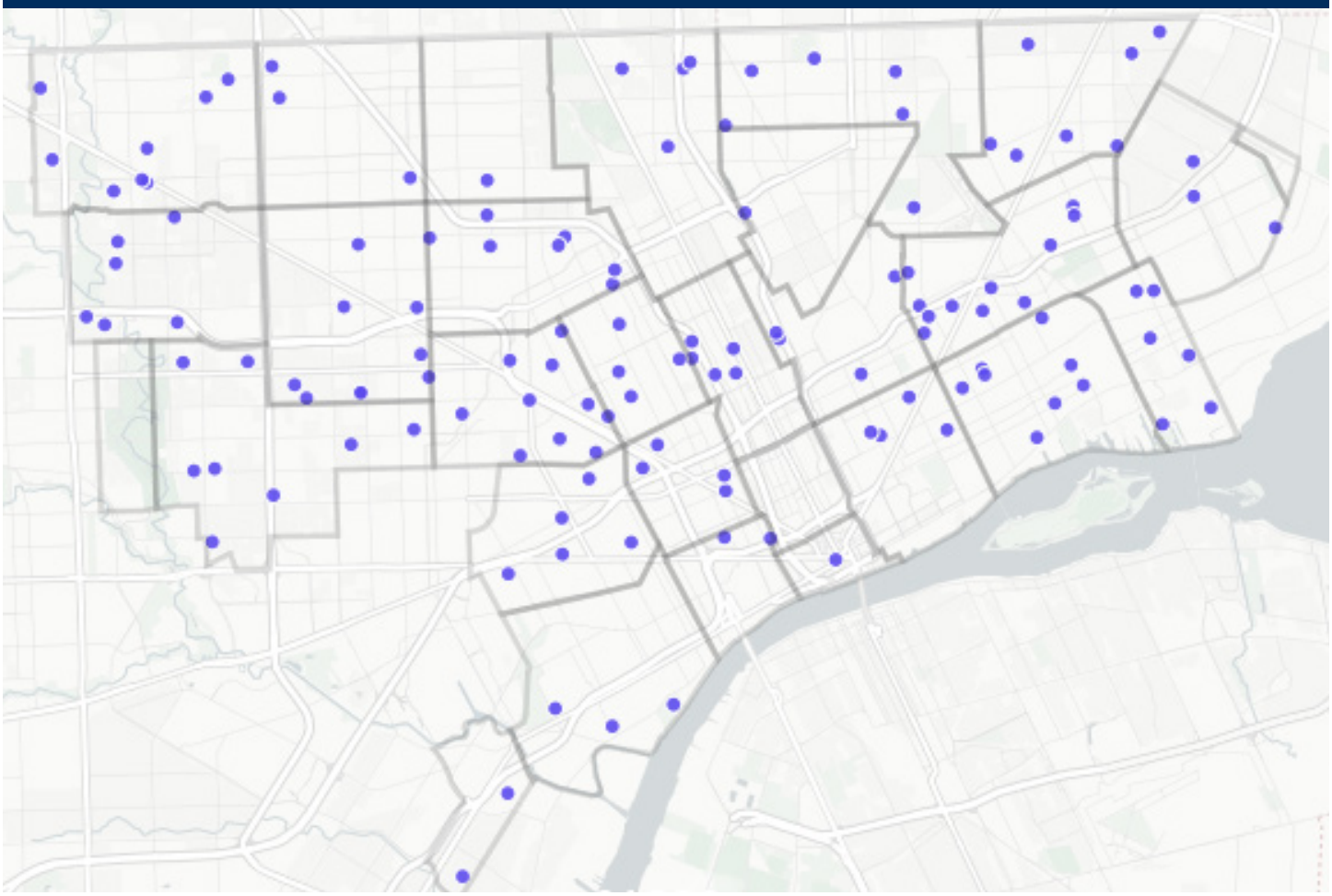
The concentrated disadvantage that undermines opportunity in Detroit today is a legacy of corporate and public policies enacted over the past several decades, which have resulted in a shortage of good jobs, inequitable school funding, the erosion of housing wealth among Black and Latino families, and rapid population decline. As the city's population and tax base shrank, so too, did the budget for many public community institutions where residents connected with each other and sought information. From 2005 to 2015, the city closed over 75 parks and recreation centers, and from 1995 to 2016, the Detroit public school district closed 195 schools.[28] School closures affected every neighborhood in the city, as shown in Figure 5. In a recent report detailing residents' perceptions of economic mobility, some Detroiters lamented the decline of neighborhood cohesion in the past several years due to the closure of neighborhood schools and proliferation of charter schools, which draw students from across the city. One community leader said, "Our children are bused away, and I think that really takes away from the camaraderie in the neighborhood. When we were small, the kids would all walk to school together, we'd walk back home together. Now the children are bused to different communities, they only see each other if they live on the same street, and I think that's really divisive in the neighborhood."[29]

In recent years, Detroit's rich network of community organizations has stepped in to bridge the gaps in social infrastructure that occur when schools or community centers close.[30] In the next section, we examine the role of community organizations in more detail and explore what building social capital looks like in practice.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS NURTURE SOCIAL CAPITAL IN DETROIT

Community-based organizations in the city play a vital role in facilitating social capital, utilizing their central role in the provision of social services and community engagement opportunities to bring residents together and promote positive

**FIGURE 5: DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL CLOSURES, FROM 1990 – 2013**



Source: Data from Grover, J., and van der Velde, Y. A School District in Crisis: Detroit's Public Schools 1842-2015.https://app.regrid.com/reports/schools#top

social ties. In 2017, **nearly one-half of residents (48%) said their neighborhood had very or somewhat active nonprofit organizations that work on local problems, while just 13% said their local groups were not active at all.**[31] According to Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD), there are at least 140 community-based organizations operating in the city focused on a variety of activities, like housing, community organizing, and economic development.[32] In addition to these groups, Detroit is home to hundreds of churches and other faith-based organizations that bring together worshippers from throughout the region with diverse education and employment backgrounds, and as such, serve as unique sites of bridging social capital.[33]

When asked what's needed to improve economic mobility in the city, one resident said, "The way that a person would move up is being a part of an organization where you're getting information, where you're networking and meeting people and getting tips."[34] How do these community organizations incorporate building social capital into their programming? The following examples illustrate the variety of approaches to developing social capital in Detroit:

### PAIRING CONNECTIONS WITH MATERIAL ASSISTANCE

- **UpTogether (formerly Family Independence Initiative)** brings families with low incomes together in cohorts to provide peer support and set household goals. The organization also offers up to $2,400 in unrestricted funds over two years. To further encourage social capital development, families can join an online platform where users start or join a small group and explain their goals, which range from catching up on bills to launching new microbusinesses; members motivate each other and provide relevant referrals and information.[35] UpTogether also quantifies the scale of social capital in its member community by asking families to estimate the dollar value of the services exchanged with others. In Detroit, where the program has been operating since 2014, families estimated they exchanged over $2.8 million in assistance with community members.[36] This model achieves significant mobility outcomes: on average, families who participate in the program for two years see a 23% increase in monthly income and an average increase from $321 to $1,315 in liquid assets.[37]
- **Unity in Our Community TimeBank** is a Southwest Detroit initiative that connects residents across neighborhoods and generations who want to exchange skills and services like child care or porch repair. Using an online platform, members post something they need assistance with or a skill they would like to share, and others respond to get involved. In its 12 years of operation, TimeBank members have exchanged an estimated 41,000 hours of work.[38] Time banks require existing social capital—without mutual trust and a belief in reciprocity, they would not get off the ground. And with each successful favor given and received, members continue to benefit from their relationships.[39]
- **Brilliant Detroit** offers programming for families with kids 0-8 years old in the areas of health, family support, and education, aimed at improving kindergarten readiness and grade-level reading by third grade. The organization delivers these services through workshops and social events hosted at a network of residential houses within Detroit neighborhoods, designed to nurture relationships between families and staff, as well as between neighbors.[40] Families who visit Brilliant Detroit houses participate in a variety of network-building programs, including a peer mental health group, literacy workshop, or community dinner. One mother explained, "...The front door is always unlocked. You don't really feel boxed in. And then once you get in and start talking to people, they're just instantly trying to figure out what you need, what they can help you with."[41]

### BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH MENTORSHIP

Adult mentorship programs in Detroit often explicitly aim to promote bridging capital by linking individuals across race, education, and class boundaries, with the goal to champion mentees in their pursuit of economic opportunity. In addition to offering material resources including training or job referrals, mentorship programs attempt to create trusting relationships between individuals. In Detroit, a few notable adult mentorship programs include:

- **Streetwise Partners** pairs business professionals with mentees who are unemployed or underemployed in order to offer skills, resources, and networks necessary to secure employment in their chosen field.[42] Mentees participate in a 12-month workforce development curriculum, networking opportunities, and receive direct connections to internship and job opportunities. According to the organization's annual report, mentees have averaged a 70% employment rate.[43]
- **Warrior Women Against Poverty** seeks to stabilize families through mentorship and connection to resources. The organization pairs clients of the Coalition On Temporary Shelter, a Detroit organization serving people experiencing homelessness, with volunteer mentors from the community. The goal of the pairings is to "build a bond of trust, provide support, offer guidance, and identify needed resources."[44] Mentees also tap into wider networks of information and assistance through bi-monthly events and workshops. Since the program began in 2016, 37 families have participated, and 83% report an overall improvement in their well-being, as measured by the strength of their network, access to resources, and ability to meet goals.[45]

- **Rebel Nell** is a social enterprise that hires women with significant barriers to employment to make jewelry and provides them with a suite of services such as housing assistance, financial education, and career readiness development. The organization also pairs participants with mentors and coaches, who aid participants with goals that range from boosting English language skills to launching a microenterprise.[46] Participants also join a lending circle, an innovative credit tool where participants pay a small amount into an account each month over a fixed period. Each month throughout the period, one participant receives the balance of the entire account. Lending circles, typically targeted to individuals with low incomes, require borrowers to have significant trust in both the partner organization and their fellow members, since a successful monthly payment relies on the full participation of each member. To date, Rebel Nell has employed 29 women and issued over $23,000 in microloans.[47]

## STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN DETROIT

### GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS SHOULD INTEGRATE SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT INTO THEIR PROGRAM MODELS TO AMPLIFY THE URGENT WORK OF ADVANCING ECONOMIC MOBILITY IN DETROIT.

Program and service delivery should aim to "strategically broker social ties" to encourage the development of larger and more diverse networks, which create additional opportunities for social capital development.[48] Residents have something to offer each other, and many are looking to grow their networks, not just seek services or resources from professional staff. Therefore, organizers can **create programming to highlight Detroiters' strengths and facilitate connections**. City-led community meetings, for example, could kick off with an icebreaker or speed networking session. Service providers could recruit clients as program volunteers or encourage them to join an advisory committee; inviting clients to participate in service provision enables them to connect with other, but also recognizes the insights and efforts of community members.

Researchers also encourage service providers to **design programs that offer long-term, meaningful engagement opportunities** between participants, not just one-off workshops.[49] Human services programs could pair a job training or literacy class with ongoing community building programming, such as a peer-led job seekers club or community dinner like those offered at the TimeBank. Cohort-based models, like those operated by Rebel Nell, enable individuals with shared goals to connect and motivate each other through the program. To stimulate connections, staff might organize discussion or lunch groups around a shared interest or encourage participants to set up carpools to attend meetings.[50]

Residents gain social capital through programs and services, as well as through their connections with organizations. As such, social service organizations can leverage their organization's social capital by **connecting clients to partner organizations, influential individuals via guest speaker events, or by inviting board members to volunteer alongside clients**. They should also aim to hire community members or program alumni as staff, to facilitate trusting and mutually beneficial relationships between individuals from similar backgrounds. Some organizations, like Brilliant Detroit, utilize their office spaces to build relationships and offer tangible assistance, by offering drop-in hours where participants are able to borrow books, use computers, or talk to staff.[51]

### ENSURE EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD HAS AN OPEN ACCESS COMMUNITY SPACE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

Public spaces facilitate interactions needed to grow social capital, but these spaces are not available to all Detroiters in their own neighborhoods. Detroiters have specifically called for **additional spending on safe, open community spaces** to improve neighborhood safety and quality of life, and some people directly connect these assets to economic mobility.[52] "It seems neighborhood centers would most provide what's missing," said one resident at a focus group on economic mobility in Detroit. "They'd bring in needed services and foster community, which is vital to connection, safety, life, and excitement."[53]

The City of Detroit, Kresge Foundation, community development organizations, and other stakeholders have heavily invested in activating vacant lots, renovating parks, and constructing community hubs in recent years, and they should continue this critical work to champion social capital development.[54] These initiatives can drive community building even before community spaces are open, per an evaluation of Kresge's KIP:D initiative, which suggests the process of rehabilitating physical spaces in a way that engages community members builds neighborhood-level social capital.[55] After community spaces are open, funding for maintenance matters too; research shows high levels of litter and poorly-maintained public spaces like playgrounds are associated with lower levels of trust in neighbors and government to do what's right.[56]

### FUND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TO PROMOTE SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT.

Local philanthropy should continue to **make funds available specifically to bring Detroiters together and develop valuable connections**. One innovative example: the Neighborhood Tables project, an initiative of Building the Engine of Community Development in Detroit (BECDD) and CDAD, aims to create formal tables where residents can gather to advocate for neighborhood priorities and in the process "build cross-sector relationships and trust within every neighborhood."[57]

Funding this work also promotes equity, since dedicated support for smaller, grassroots organizations ensures more neighborhoods have active, sustainable organizations to bring neighbors together, with less reliance on the limited personal funds of community leaders.

### INCREASE ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT SOCIAL SERVICES AND PROGRAMS.

Information is one of the most important forms of currency that our contacts can share with us, but Detroiters report significant challenges finding information about available programs and services, such as the poverty tax exemption or affordable after-school care. To resolve this, residents pointed to the need for "someplace where people can go to find out how to do things (check deeds, check landlords, find out about community meetings, etc.)."[58] **Democratizing information about public or nonprofit resources** reduces the need for residents to know someone to find what they are looking for. To reduce information gaps, residents have advocated for expanded home internet and Wi-Fi connection spots; comprehensive online, mobile, and physical community information hubs; and universal translation of community information into all languages that Detroiters speak at home.[59]

### CONTINUE TO INVEST IN EQUITABLE ECONOMIC, WORKFORCE, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

Social capital is not "an alternative to providing greater financial resources and public services to poor communities. Rather, it constitutes an essential means to increase such resources and to make more effective use of them."[60] Developing social capital as a strategy to reduce poverty in Detroit should complement, but not replace, the ongoing but incomplete work of investing directly in neighborhood revitalization, workforce development, educational equity, housing stability, and other initiatives. In turn, these projects can positively impact social capital. A successful job placement program benefits participants, and it also has the potential to benefit their networks; for every additional Detroiter who secures a good job, their community gains one more person who knows how to find one.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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