
Does Government Crowd Out Social Capital?

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social capital project

A project of the Joint Economic Committee – Republicans | Ranking Member Mike Lee (R-UT)
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The more than half-century decline of Americans' social capital is evident in atrophied connections to family, less vibrant communities, smaller faith groups, and fewer connections to work. A portion of the decline in social capital is likely driven by the growth of government during the same time. Declining social capital has negative consequences for peoples' physical health, mental well-being, and economic security.

- Social capital reached its zenith in the middle of the 20th century and has steadily declined since.
- The U.S. government has grown substantially during this time. Real per-person government spending has grown 20-fold between 1929 and 2019 and federal regulatory restrictions increased 164 percent between 1970 and 2020.
- The explosive growth of the U.S. government through the 1960s and 1970s matches the contemporaneous inflection point and decline of social capital. Governments distort the foundations for vibrant families, communities, congregations, and workplaces.
- Most macro-level research on social capital and the size of government is inconclusive and not appropriately designed to identify the causal effects of government on social capital.
- The micro-level research, however, clearly shows that many different types of government spending directly reduce measures of social capital.
- New evidence shows that U.S. counties that rely more heavily on government assistance tend to also have weaker social capital. More than 70 percent of counties in the top decile of the Joint Economic Committee's Social Capital Index are in the bottom third of counties with the lowest share of SNAP participation among households below 100 percent of the poverty line. States with a greater number of regulatory restrictions also tend to have lower levels of social capital.
- The decline of social capital is a complex phenomenon with many contributing factors. However, the size and scope of government is the one most directly in policymakers' control. To begin reversing the tide of receding social connection lawmakers should scale back government's growth.

INTRODUCTION

The things we do together—our social capital—are in part molded by government. Stable government institutions and fair rule of law can support social capital. At the same time, government programs and regulations can weaken social capital by discouraging work, undermining families, and displacing institutions of civil society. These and other measures of social capital—trust in others, civic participation, safe communities—are closely associated with better mental well-being, physical health, and economic mobility. Thus, it is important to determine the extent to which government has supported or undermined social capital.

Answering this question is particularly urgent in light of the weakening of social capital over the past several decades in the United States. Social capital reached its zenith in the middle of the 20th century and has steadily declined since. Membership in private organizations, church attendance, marriage rates, workplace connection, and societal trust have all declined in the last 50 years. During this same time, all levels of American government have grown substantially. Real per-person government spending has grown 20-fold between 1929 and 2019 and social benefits have grown even faster. Federal regulatory restrictions increased 164 percent between 1970 and 2020, adding an average of about 13 thousand restrictions each year. It is important to determine whether this growth in government activity has played a role in the decline in our core institutions of civil society, our families, and our workplaces over the past half century.

Early social capital theorists described the many ways that governments can crowd out social capital, replacing private associations and private action with a duller, state-sanctioned life. Others have pointed to additional factors that may have contributed to declining social capital, including changes in technology, and evolving economic conditions. Reversing the tides of economic and technological change is neither desirable nor feasible. However, if the size and intrusiveness of government is contributing to the erosion of social capital, lawmakers have a straightforward remedy: reduce the size and scope of government.

This report begins by establishing the trend of social capital through the 20th century by reporting historical rates of religiosity, social trust, and marriage. The following sections briefly review different theories

that explain this decline, focusing on how the growth of government could be crowding out and distorting the institutions and behaviors that maintain social bonds. The report concludes by presenting trends in the growth of the U.S. government and shows new evidence that counties where households are more reliant on government services tend to have lower social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL DECLINES IN AMERICA

In 2018, the Joint Economic Committee Republicans released a Social Capital Index (SCI) to measure the geographic variation of social capital across the U.S.¹ The SCI is a measure of Americans' associational life—the activities that bind together families, communities, and societies—and is composed of seven sub-indices measuring family unity, family interaction, social support, community health, institutional health, collective efficacy, and philanthropic health. The SCI is the most comprehensive and detailed snapshot of social capital across the U.S. states and counties. Although this work did not present longitudinal estimates of social capital, the SCI and the resulting research agenda is, in part, premised on other evidence that American associational life is less vibrant than it once was.²

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam's seminal book on the decline of social capital in the U.S., he argues that social capital increased in the first half of the 20th century, peaked in the 1960s, and has declined since, making a rough bell curve. Putnam's evidence relies on trends in political participation, civic participation, religiosity, workplace connections, and various measures of reciprocity, altruism, and societal trust.³ With co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett, he expands on these trends in *The Upswing* which uses a composite measure of social capital to argue the social capital bell curve peaks in the early 1960s.⁴

The metrics used to measure social capital over time are highly imperfect and subject to poor data quality—especially trends from the

¹ "The Geography of Social Capital in America," U.S. Joint Economic Committee Republicans, April 11, 2018, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2018/4/the-geography-of-social-capital-in-america>.

² "What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America," U.S. Joint Economic Committee Republicans, May 15, 2017, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2017/5/what-we-do-together-the-state-of-associational-life-in-america>.

³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, 2000, 140-141.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, Simon and Schuster, 2020.

first half of the 20th century. There are few consistent, high-quality measures of things like volunteerism, charitable giving, and community engagement that date back to the early 1900s. These data limitations make the upward trend of social capital in the first half of the 20th century harder to measure precisely. The more recent downward trend in social capital is more clearly evident across multiple different measures.

To illustrate the decades-long downward trend in social capital, as well as the uncertainty in the early 20th century trends, Figures 1, 2, and 3 present rates of religiosity, social trust, and marriage, respectively. These measures are chosen for three reasons: 1) their importance to the concept of social capital, 2) their reliance on different underlying data sources, and 3) long timespans. In these measures, the strengthening of social capital through the first half of the 20th century—the left-hand side upswing of the social capital bell curve—is evident, but less prominent than the ensuing downward trends. After controlling for demographics and changes in preferences, some scholars have questioned the magnitude of social capital’s rise in the first half of the 20th century, but most still recognize that in recent decades Americans’ associational life has declined.⁵

Worshiping together in faith communities and the related social support that religious institutions provide, are arguably among the most important sources of social capital, particularly in America where religious observance tends to be significantly higher than peer nations.⁶ Research from Opportunity Insights shows that people are most likely to make friendships that bridge socioeconomic lines—a measure that is correlated with economic mobility—in religious groups, compared to neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools.⁷

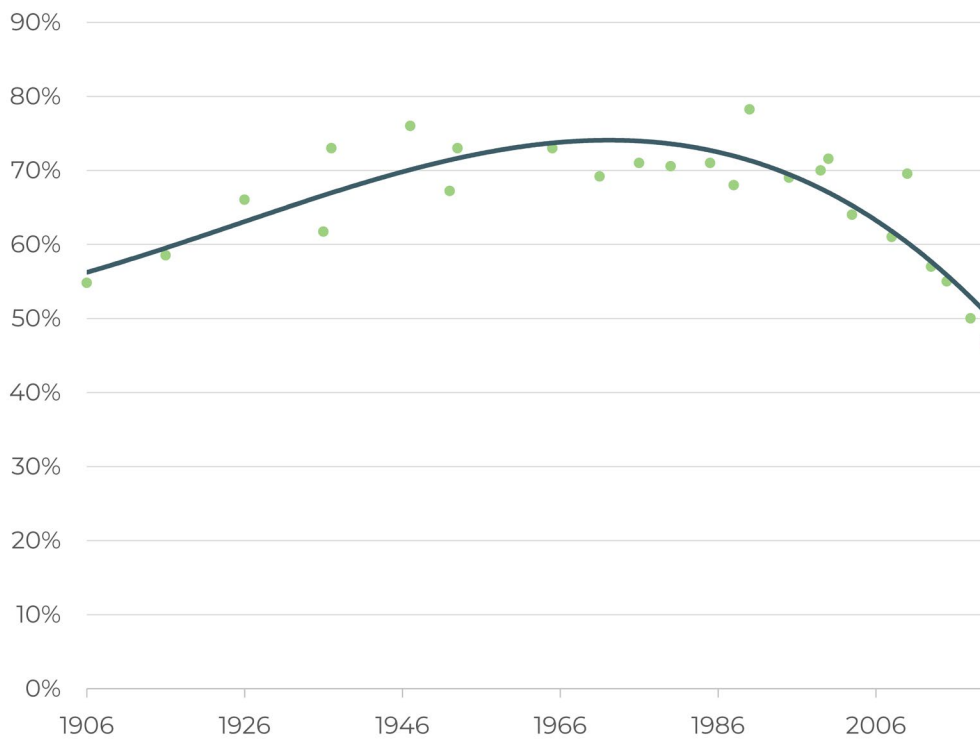
⁵ Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, “Understanding the Decline in Social Capital, 1952-1998,” NBER Working Paper 8295, May 2001, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w8295/w8295.pdf; Lyman Stone, “Bread and Circuses: The Replacement of American Community Life,” American Enterprise Institute, March 24, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/bread-and-circuses-the-replacement-of-american-community-life/>.

⁶ “The Age Gap in Religion Around the World,” Pew Research Center, June 13, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/>

⁷ Raj Chetty et al. “Social capital II: Determinants of Economic Connectedness,” *Nature* 608, no. 7921 (August 2022): 122-134, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04997-3>.

Figure 1 shows membership rates for religious organizations from 1906 through 2020. Figure 1 appends data from three surveys collected by the Association of Religion Data Archives, and Gallup polling data. These data are subject to various reporting inconsistencies and different survey designs that make strict comparisons from year to year difficult, but the plotted polynomial trend line clearly shows downward movement beginning between 1960 and 1980. From 1964 (the peak of the fitted trend), religious membership has declined by about 28 percent. The trend of religious attendance from the General Social Survey (GSS), plotted by age cohorts, shows a similar decline beginning with the cohort of adults that came of age in the 1960s.⁸

Figure 1: Religious Membership Rates, 1906–2020

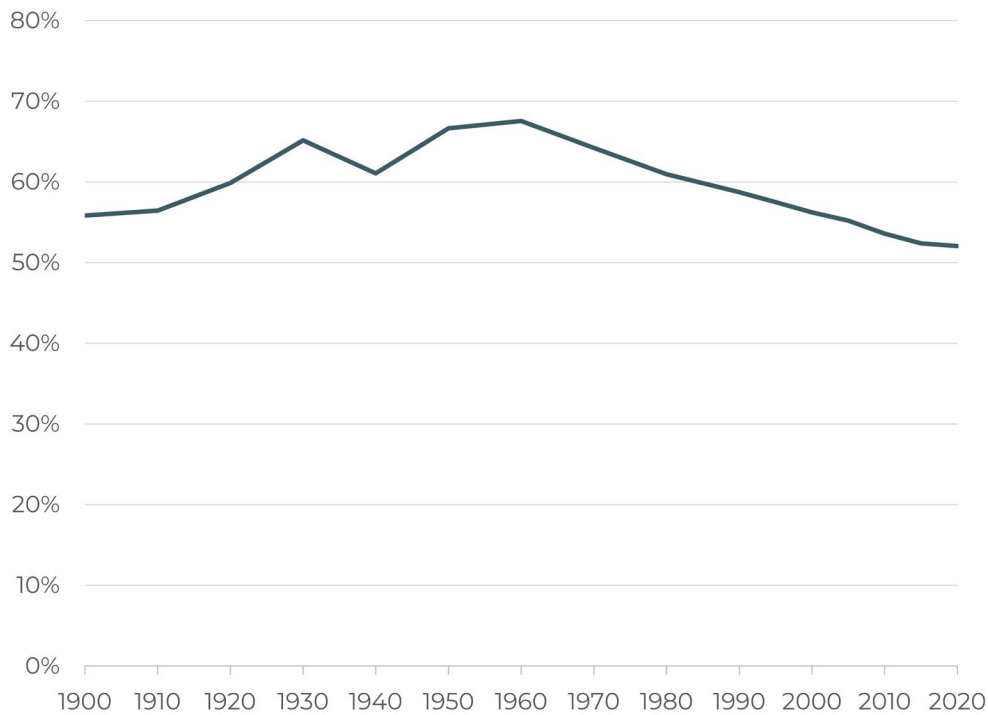


Sources: United States Census of Religious Bodies, State File (1906, 1916, 1926, 1936); Churches and Church Membership in the United States (1952, 1971, 1980, 1990); U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations and Membership Study (2000, 2010); Gallup Polling.⁹

⁸ General Social Survey (GSS) 1972-2021; JEC Calculations.

⁹ "United States Census of Religious Bodies, State File (1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936);" "Churches and Church Membership in the United States (1952, 1971, 1980, 1990);" and "U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations and Membership Study (2000, 2010);" via the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), <https://www.thearda.com/data-archive/browse-categories?cid=B#B>; Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup Polling, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Note: Data from each source are appended.¹⁰ The trend line is a fitted third order polynomial.
Figure 2: Percent of U.S. Population Aged 15+ that is Currently Married, 1900–2020



Source: Decennial Census, 1900-1910; U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Marital Status Tables; Statistical Abstract of the United States; JEC Calculations.

Note: The number of married people aged 15+ is the standard population restriction for this question used by the Census Bureau. Data is every 10 years 1900-1990 and every 5 years 1995-2020.

Some of the most intimate sources of social capital flow from marriage, and the broader array of associated familial relationships. Marriage also offers the foundation for stable, two parent families that allow for the emotional safety children need for full, healthy development, as described in the Social Capital Project’s report on *The Demise of the*

¹⁰ Data from ARDA comes from three separate surveys ranging the timespan from 1906-2010. Each survey collects responses for the total number of members of each religious denomination by state for the given survey year. Since the surveys used are not the same, the methodologies are distinct as well. The methodologies for each survey are as follows:

1906-1936: Sum the number of individuals that are members from each denomination for all states and divide by 0.7 of the total U.S. population to get the U.S. adult population in the given year.

Between 1950 and 2010, 0.7 is the average of the share of the 18+ U.S. population.

1952: Sum the total membership across denominations and divide by the U.S. adult population.

1971-2010: Sum the total adherents across denominations and divide by the U.S. adult population.

Gallup: This survey asks adults if they belong to “a church, synagogue or mosque.” Survey dates are 1937, 1947, 1953, 1965, 1976, 1985, 1988, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020.

*Happy Two-Parent Home.*¹¹ Figure 2 plots the percentage of the age 15+ population that is currently married by year. The trend increases through the first half of the 20th century, peaking in 1960, and declines steadily in the following decades. From the peak in 1960 to 2020, marriage rates are down 23 percent. This trend is the product of people marrying at older ages and fewer people choosing to marry at all.

The final longitudinal component of social capital presented here is a measure of individuals' trust of others. Figure 3 shows pooled responses by age cohort to the question from the GSS that asks, "Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" While we cannot know for certain what people mean when they agree that "people can always be trusted," it is likely that trusting others is at least partly the product of repeated, positive interactions with others.¹² If Americans have fewer positive interactions with smaller numbers of people, we expect them to report lower levels of general social trust. Figure 3 groups responses by age cohort from 6 years of the GSS between 1998-2021. The figure shows an index on the vertical axis where higher numbers represent more trust, and the horizontal axis shows the year the respondent turned 18. For example, the year 1978 includes every individual who was born in 1960 and thus turned 18 years old in 1978, regardless of when they were surveyed by the GSS. For instance, some of the individuals included for 1978 were surveyed by the GSS in 1998 when they were in their late 30s, and some of the individuals included for 1978 were surveyed by the GSS in 2014 when they were in their 50s.

Interpreting these data by age cohort rests on the assumption that an individual's expression of trust is reflective of lived experiences that will vary across generations, and ideas about social trust are generally informed by experiences in early adulthood. This latter assumption is guided by research showing that within generations, social trust is

¹¹ Rachel Sheffield and Scott Winship, "The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home," U.S. Joint Economic Committee Republicans, July 23, 2020, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2020/7/the-demise-of-the-happy-two-parent-home>.

¹² The literature that relies on survey responses to questions of trust suffers from a number of theoretical and empirical problems when compared across countries or used in economic models, as Alex Nowrasteh and Andrew Forrester explain in detail. Alex Nowrasteh and Andrew C. Forrester, "Trust Doesn't Explain Regional U.S. Economic Development and Five Other Theoretical and Empirical Problems with the Trust Literature," Cato Working Paper No. 57, January 6, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2020-01/working-paper-57-updated.pdf>.

stable over time.¹³ While this way of interpreting the data requires strong assumptions, it allows us to consider how social trust might have evolved prior to the initial survey year in 1998, by using information gathered in later years from people who came of age during the 1960s when the government was growing especially quickly.

Figure 3 shows the familiar downward trend beginning a bit before the second half of the 20th century, with each successive generation expressing lower levels of trust. The decline of about 0.5 on the index from 1960-2021 is the equivalent of moving from half of respondents reporting that “you usually can’t be too careful” when dealing with new people and the other half reporting “people can usually be trusted” to all respondent reporting that “you usually can’t be too careful.” The wider variation in the index’s earliest and latest years reflects fewer survey years in which individuals who turned 18 in a particular year could respond. For example, an individual who turned 18 in 1936 was already 80 years old in 1998 when GSS first asked this trust question and thus had fewer opportunities to respond before dying, and an individual who turned 18 in 2018 only had two opportunities to respond to the GSS as an adult. Despite small sample sizes in many years, the fitted polynomial trend line clearly shows downward movement beginning in the 1950s and faster declines for subsequent generations.¹⁴ Other measures of trust show a similar downward trend beginning in the 1960s.¹⁵

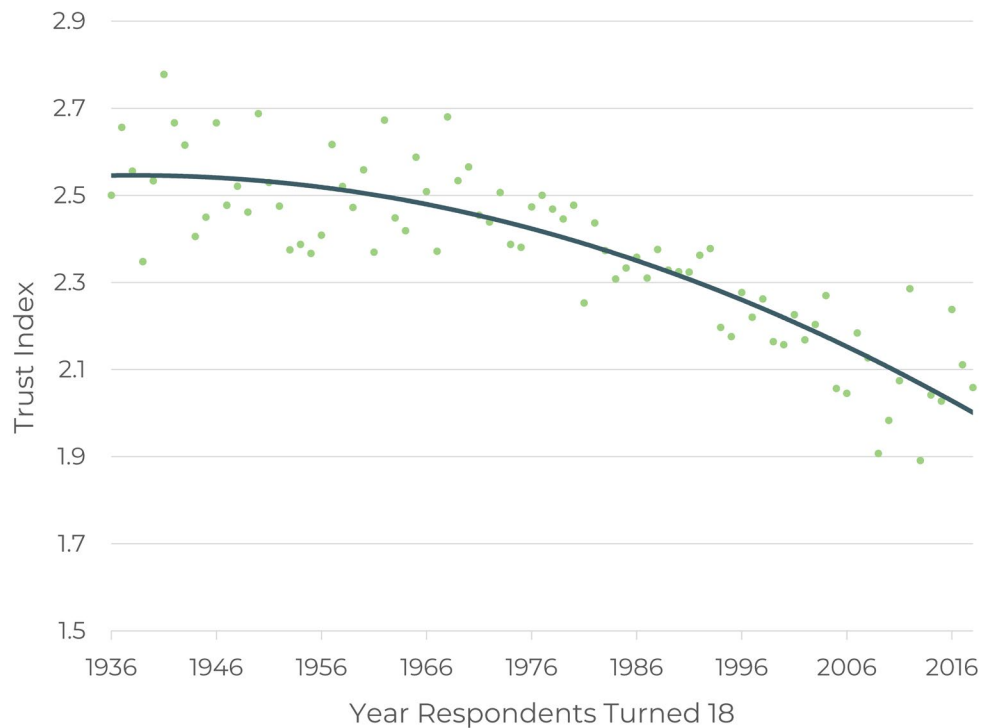
Over the last century, rates of religiosity, marriage, and social trust show a similar trend. Social capital is neither high nor low in the early-1900s relative to the historical average and may have strengthened somewhat in the subsequent decades. Beginning sometime between 1960 and 1980, social capital began to decline, falling consistently over the remaining decades.

¹³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, 2000, 140-141.

¹⁴ Number of respondents in each year ranges from 10 to 188, with an average of 97 across all years. Years with fewer than 10 respondents are excluded.

¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 140.

Figure 3: Level of Expressed Social Trust by Age Cohort, United States, 1936–2018



Source: General Social Survey (GSS) 1998-2021; JEC Calculations.

Note: GSS variable “People can be trusted, or you can’t be too careful?” is tabulated by year of birth and reported as birth year plus 18 to reflect the age of adulthood. A higher index score reflects more social trust reported by survey respondents of a certain age. The trend line is a fitted third order polynomial.¹⁶

THEORIES OF DECLINE

Social capital reached its zenith in the middle of the 20th century and has steadily declined since. Such a pervasive societal trend begs explanation—what caused the decline in social capital? The cause is likely complex, multifaceted, and difficult to measure definitively, but given the central importance of social capital for personal well-being and functional societies, understanding the causes more fully is worth serious consideration.

Although causal relationships are often difficult to identify, researchers have pointed to many different factors that could have driven the

¹⁶ Survey responses range from “People Can Almost Always be Trusted” on the high end to, “You Almost Always Can’t be too Careful,” on the low end. The number of responses for each answer is multiplied by a value ranging from 1-4, with “You Almost Always Can’t be too Careful” multiplied by a value of 1, and “People Can Almost Always be Trusted” multiplied by 4. The resulting value is divided by the total number of observations per cohort year to find the final index score.

decline in social capital since the 1960s. Possible factors include: time constraints of two-career families, suburbanization and sprawl, electronic entertainment (particularly television), higher levels of educational attainment, income inequality, affluence, and the growth of government.¹⁷ While each of these factors is worthy of consideration, the remainder of this paper will investigate how government crowds out social capital.

In theory, state actions can displace the relationships that make up social capital as government takes over previously private areas of economic, personal, and community life. In his 1953 book, *Quest for Community*, Robert Nisbet builds on the scholarship of earlier philosophers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, by outlining how the powerful modern state can disrupt and erode sources of social capital when “the basic needs for education, recreation, welfare, economic production, distribution, and consumption, health, spiritual and physical, and all other services of society are made aspects of the administrative structure of political government.”¹⁸ More recently, Charles Murray described a similar mechanism, explaining that “every time the government takes some of the trouble out of performing the functions of family, community, vocation, and faith, it also strips those institutions of some of their vitality—it drains some of the life from them.”¹⁹ As the state grows, supportive relationships atrophy.

Not all government intervention has to be to the detriment of social capital. Some of the foundational tasks of liberal-democratic governments may help to indirectly reinforce, if not directly build, social capital. Francis Fukuyama notes that “in a stable and safe environment for public interaction and property rights, trust is more likely to arise spontaneously as a result of iterated interactions of rational individuals.”²⁰ Under well-run core state functions, citizens are better able to “associate, volunteer, vote, or take care of one another.” However, it is important not to overstate this point or draw a

¹⁷ Putnam attributes a significant portion—as much as half—of the decline in social capital to generational change but leaves open the question of what drives the generational differences. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon and Schuster, 2000; Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, “Understanding the Decline in Social Capital, 1952-1998,” “What We Do Together: The State of Associational Life in America.”

¹⁸ Robert Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1953, 282.

¹⁹ Charles Murray, “Irving Kristol Lecture 2009: The Happiness of the People,” March 11, 2009, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/the-happiness-of-the-people/>.

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, “Social Capital and Civil Society,” International Monetary Fund, March 2000, <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/001/2000/074/article-A001-en.xml>.

unidirectional line from government to social capital. Some level of shared norms and community trust are “almost universally seen as a necessary condition for modern liberal democracy”²¹ and lower levels of social capital are associated with government corruption, inefficiency, and less innovative political activity.²² Because social capital and good governance are so interconnected, a limited state may have the ability to boost social capital to an extent by ensuring property rights and established social norms around safety are maintained.

Many of the earliest social capital theorists assumed that government activity, or the welfare state more specifically, is a substitute for social capital, mechanically reducing the personal benefit of maintaining a large network of social connections, participation in mutual aid or volunteering, and other informal support networks. In contrast, many modern theorists adopt the opposite view. More generous and universal transfer programs could instead reinforce social capital by fostering trust and meeting the material needs of citizens, allowing them additional time to engage in their communities.²³ It could also be the case that there is no link between government and social capital.

To begin to investigate the connection between government and social capital, the following section presents trends in U.S. government spending and regulatory activity that can be compared to previously documented trends in social capital.

GROWTH OF U.S. GOVERNMENT

The U.S. government was initially small, limited by the Constitution to a core set of enumerated responsibilities. Over time, federal, state, and local governments have expanded in size and scope. As measured by spending and regulatory activity, the U.S. government has consistently grown, taking on an ever-expanding set of issues, most of which were free of government interference until the mid-20th century. This section will first review spending growth and then present evidence on regulatory accumulation.

²¹ Francis Fukuyama, “Social Capital and Civil Society.”

²² Robert D. Putnam, “What makes democracy work?” *National Civic Review*, 82, no. 2 (Spring 1993): <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.4100820204>; Charles A. Johnson, “Political Culture in American States: Elazar’s Formulation Examined,” *American Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 3 (August 1976): 491-509, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2110685.pdf>.

²³ Staffan Kumlin and Bo Rothstein, “Making and Breaking Social Capital: The Impact of Welfare-State Institutions,” *Comparative Political Studies* 38, 4 (2005): 339-365, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414004273203>.

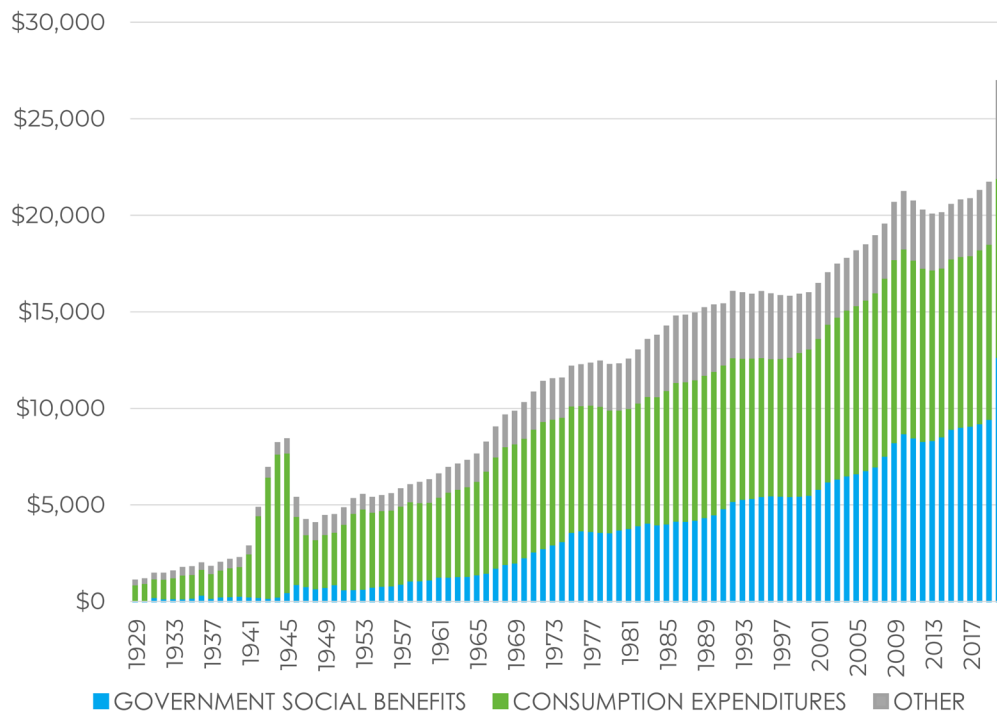
Spending Growth

Between 1929 and 2019 annual real per-person federal, state, and local government spending grew from \$1,041 to \$21,658, rising further to \$26,920 in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a share of GDP, government spending has also increased; it climbed steadily through the first half of the 20th century, permanently surpassed 26 percent of GDP in 1967, and climbed steadily beyond that level through the 1980s and in to the early-1990s. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, spending stood at 33 percent of GDP. While the story is similar for both presentations of the data, Figure 4 shows total federal, state, and local real per-person government expenditures by type of spending.

Government spending spiked for the first time in the early 1940s, following the Great Depression and during WWII. Spending growth accelerated in the early 1950s, due mainly to the Korean War. Spending growth accelerated again beginning in 1965 when Democrats took one party control of the House, Senate, and presidency, following Barry Goldwater's presidential defeat. During this period, Congress passed many of President Lyndon Johnson's ambitious domestic spending programs, known as the Great Society. Increased military spending explains the acceleration in the early 1980s and again at the beginning of the 21st century following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The figure also shows large visible increases following the 2008 financial crisis and a large jump in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall trend is primarily driven by federal spending; state and local spending growth is partly influenced by federal policy and generally increases at a steadier rate.

The stylized fact that social capital grew slowly or remained constant in the first half of the 20th century and began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s, is consistent with a theory of government spending crowding out social capital. Overall measures of government spending accelerate for the first time in the 1960s and 1970s, without returning to a lower level as they did following the Great Depression and WWII expenditure spike. The 1960-1970 window is the same time period when measures of social capital (Figures 1, 2, and 3) peak and begin to decline.

Figure 4: Real Per-person Expenditures by All Levels of Government by Type, 1929–2020



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics; JEC Calculations.

Note: Figure shows annual total current expenditures divided by total U.S. population, adjusted using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) to show value in 2020 dollars.

Figure 4 shows that early government spending was primarily consumption expenditures—employee compensation, use of fixed capital investments, and other purchases. Government social benefits—social insurance and other income support programs—grow from around 15 percent of total expenditures in 1955, permanently surpassing 20 percent in 1968, and steadily increase from there. Social benefits make up 44 percent of all spending in 2019. There is a large body of research that shows some of these benefit programs affect incentives to work, marry, and interact with close family (see following section *What the Literature Says*).

Not all government activity necessarily crowds out social capital, it could crowd in or increase social capital. Limited governments that protect property rights and reinforce shared norms can help support and strengthen existing forms of social capital. However, there is likely a tipping point at which additional government activity begins to compete with, rather than reinforce, private associations. A similar result from the economic growth literature finds that when

government expenditures surpass about 26 percent of GDP, annual per capita GDP growth begins to decline.²⁴ In the context of social capital, we should expect when government is very limited in size and scope, expansions of government could potentially reinforce existing social capital. At some inflection point, additional government spending begins to crowd out social capital. If this hypothesis is correct, it appears that the U.S. has far surpassed the optimal size of government, suggesting the state is indeed crowding out social capital.

Regulatory Growth

Spending is not the only way to measure government's size. Like spending, regulations come in many different types, but their general purpose is to compel individuals and businesses to conform to government policies. For example, if employment regulations or building codes increase costs for houses of worship, regulations can divert resources to compliance and away from supporting communities. Similarly, burdensome labor regulations can increase employment costs and reduce job availability, especially for marginally attached workers. To the extent that increased regulatory compliance costs reduce profits and economic growth, they can also reduce the private resources available for charitable endeavors.

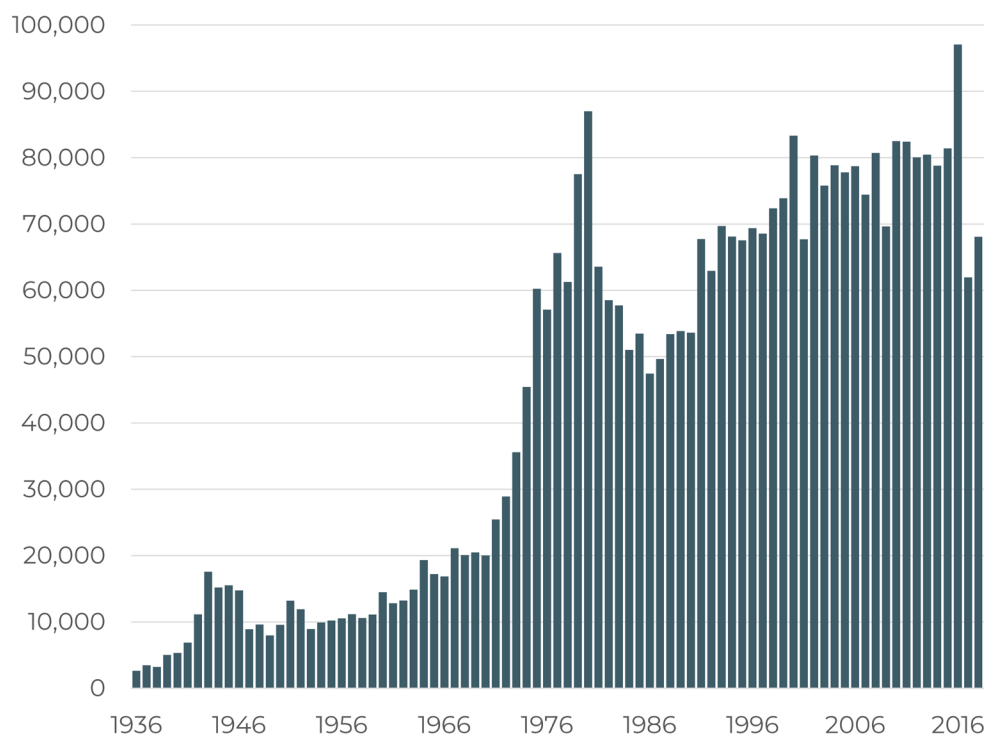
Federal agencies promulgate thousands of new regulations each year and state and local bodies add to that.²⁵ One measure of the flow of regulatory activity is the number of pages published in the federal register each year. The federal register is the daily account of all the proposed and final rules, agency guidance, and executive orders. Figure 5 shows that federal regulatory activity has grown dramatically since the 1970s. The annual number of pages increased from 20,000 in 1970 to 87,000 in 1980.²⁶ The same figure shows another regulatory resurgence in the 1990s.

²⁴ Spending at all levels of the U.S. government surpassed 26 percent of GDP in 1967. Bureau of Economic Analysis; JEC Calculations; Livio Di Matteo, "Measuring Government in the 21st Century: An International Overview of the Size and Efficiency of Public Spending," Fraser Institute, 2013, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/measuring-government-in-the-21st-century.pdf>.

²⁵ Clyde Wayne Crews, "Ten Thousand Commandments 2021," Competitive Enterprise Institute, June 30, 2021, <https://cei.org/studies/ten-thousand-commandments-2021/>.

²⁶ "Federal Register Pages Published," Federal Register Statistics, via the George Washington University Regulatory Studies Center, Updated July 9, 2020, <https://regulatorystudies.columbian.gwu.edu/reg-stats>.

Figure 5: Total Pages Published in the Federal Register, 1936–2019



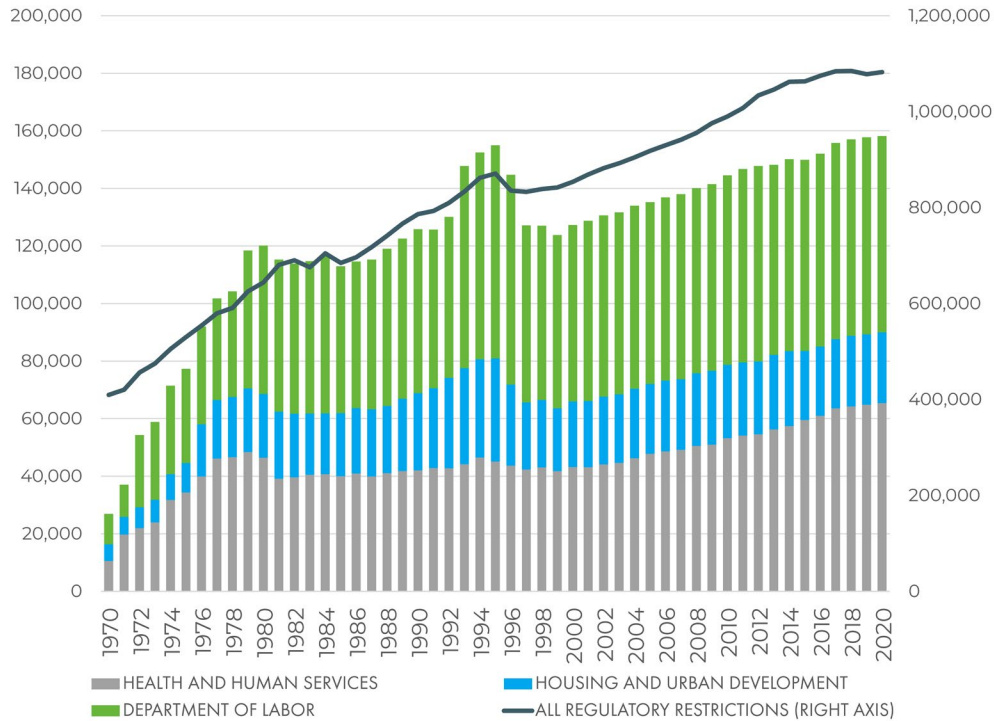
Source: Federal Register Statistics, via George Washington University Regulatory Studies Center.

Counting pages is an imperfect proxy for the regulatory burden because it does not reflect the scope of restrictions contained in those pages. Fortunately, these restrictions can be approximated by counting all instances of words that signal a responsibility to comply with a requirement, such as “shall” or “must.” QuantGov, a project of the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, counts these restrictions in the Code of Federal Regulations each year, by agency. Figure 6 shows the stock of all federal regulatory restrictions as the dark green line on the right axis. On the left axis are restrictions promulgated by the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development. These three agencies are closely associated with work, family, and housing—all key components of social capital.

Figure 6 shows all federal regulatory restrictions grew by 164 percent between 1970 and 2020, or at an average rate of 13 thousand net restrictions added each year. Restrictions promulgated by the three agencies rise most quickly in the 10 years between 1970 and 1980, accounting for 70 percent of the total growth in the three agencies’

restrictions between 1970 and 2020.²⁷ Although the restrictions data start in 1970, the trend in Figure 5 suggests that total restrictions were substantially lower pre-1970. The sharp rise in each measure of regulation around 1970 coincides with declining measures of social capital.

Figure 6: Total Federal Regulatory Restrictions, 1970–2020



Source: Patrick McLaughlin, Jonathan Nelson, Thurston Powers, Walter Stover, and Stephen Strosko, RegData US 4.0 Annual (dataset), QuantGov, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, Arlington, VA, 2021 (accessed November 8, 2022).

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS: DOES GOVERNMENT SPENDING CROWD OUT SOCIAL CAPITAL?

There are reasonable theoretical cases to be made that government activity can either crowd in (increase) or crowd out (decrease) social

²⁷ The temporary increase beginning in 1993 is largely driven by labor regulations and partly explained by new OSHA rules that were later reformed and consolidated as part of President Bill Clinton’s National Partnership for Reinventing Government initiative which successfully eliminated thousands of pages of regulations in 1996 and 1997. Patrick McLaughlin and Stephen Strosko, “What Can the 1990s Tell Us about Good Regulatory Policy in the 21st Century?” The Bridge, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, September 4, 2018, <https://www.mercatus.org/bridge/commentary/what-can-1990s-tell-us-about-good-regulatory-policy-21st-century>.

capital. Determining the validity of these arguments should ultimately be an empirical question. In addition, the sign and magnitude of the effect of government on social capital may vary based on the type, size, or quality of government. Unfortunately, for such an important question, there is comparatively little quality macro-level empirical analysis to provide a clear answer. However, the micro-level empirical research does show a clearer causal relationship, finding that certain types of government activity decrease components of social capital.

Macro-level Research

There are a number of studies that attempt to assess the relationship between government and social capital, mostly using survey data from the European Union or simply assessing trends or variation within countries. Unlike standard economic indicators, such as GDP or employment, there are few standardized and multi-year measures of social capital across or within countries. Thus, most studies cannot credibly speak to causality, suffer from small sample sizes, and almost always find conflicting results.

Most of the social capital literature presents simple cross-sectional correlations between or within countries using questions from the European Values Study (EVS), Eurobarometer, or similar surveys. While the research usually highlights findings that contradict the crowd out hypothesis, almost every empirical study also reports conflicting results (evidence for both crowding in and crowding out) or reports weak or null results. These studies in general are not designed to identify the causal effects of government on social capital. They cannot determine whether larger government causes stronger social capital, strong social capital causes larger government, or both larger government and strong social capital are driven by some third underlying factor. One study improves on previous research by examining whether relatively larger increases in the size of government in some countries than others is associated with stronger social capital growth. While the authors find a positive correlation between the size of government and lagged social capital, this result may be driven by a third factor like an increase in economic productivity that both boosts the demand for government spending and strengthens social capital within a country. Moreover, it is notable that in an alternative specification without lags

that is able to control for more factors, the authors no longer find a significant correlation between government and social capital.²⁸

The macro-level literature focusing on welfare spending in particular, generally finds that more generous welfare states are correlated with greater socioeconomic segregation, less volunteering, and fewer close relationships.²⁹ At the same time, it also finds more generous welfare states are sometimes correlated with a greater number of associational activities (such as organizational memberships and contact with friends) and higher social trust.³⁰ There are many ways to interpret these results, but the safest conclusion is that we cannot learn about the causal effect of government on social capital from this body of cross-sectional research; the confounding differences between countries make drawing any conclusions difficult.

If this group of studies were all that we had, we would be forced to conclude that there is no strong evidence that government has, or does not have, any effect on social capital. However, there is a much better developed body of research reviewed in the next section that lends credible evidence that larger government, especially social welfare programs, decrease an individual's social capital.

Microeconomic Research

²⁸ Kathryn B. Brewer, Hans Oh, and Shilpi Sharma, "'Crowding In' or 'Crowding Out'? An Examination of the Impact of the Welfare State on Generalized Social Trust," *International Journal of Social Welfare* 23, no. 1 (2014): 61-68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12019>.

²⁹ Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, "Social Volunteering in Welfare States: Where Crowding Out Should Occur," *Political Studies*, 59(1), (2011), 135-155, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00838.x>; John P.T.M. Gelissen, Wim J.H. van Oorschot, and Ellen Finsveen, "How Does The Welfare State Influence Individuals' Social Capital?" *European Societies* 14, no. 3 (2012): 416-440, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2012.676660>; Thomas van der Meer, Peer Scheepers, and Manfred te Grotenhuis, "States as Molders of Informal Relations?" *European societies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 233-255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616690802133293>; Tim Reeskens and Wim van Oorschot, "European Feelings of Deprivation Amidst the Financial Crisis: Effects of Welfare State Effort and Informal Social Relations," *Acta Sociologica* 57, no. 3 (2014): 191-206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699313504231>; Birte Gundelach, Markus Freitag, and Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, "Making or Breaking Informal Volunteering," *European Societies*, 12, 5 (2010): 627-652, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2010.497224>.

³⁰ Wim van Oorschot and Wil Arts, "The Social Capital of European Welfare States: The Crowding Out Hypothesis Revisited," *Journal of European Social Policy*, 15(1), 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928705049159>; Wim van Oorschot, Wil Arts, and Loek Halman, "Welfare State Effects on Social Capital and Informal Solidarity in the European Union: Evidence from the 1999/2000 European Values Study," *Policy and Politics* 33, no. 1 (2005): 33-54, <https://doi.org/10.1332/0305573052708474>.

Because social capital is an amorphous concept, composed of numerous component parts, and influenced by an even greater number of private and public actions, it can be helpful to examine how specific government programs can change private actions. There is clear evidence that certain types of government interventions reduce work, marriage, household size, charitable giving, and community cooperation.

A significant body of empirical research shows that government transfers—especially those without work requirements—reduce work, which is a key place people build and maintain social capital.³¹ For example, receiving housing assistance causes lower labor force participation and lower earnings among working-age, able-bodied adults.³² Losing Medicaid coverage is estimated to cause large increases in employment.³³ Following the 1960s and 1970s introduction of food stamps, employment decreased significantly³⁴ and a more recent study finds that when immigrants receive access to food stamps they work less.³⁵

There is also some evidence that anti-poverty programs often exacerbate family instability by subsidizing single parenthood and discouraging marriage for benefit recipients.³⁶ Most of the more than

³¹ Christina King, Scott Winship, and Adam Michel, “Reconnecting Americans to the Benefits of Work,” U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee Republicans, October 27, 2021, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2021/10/reconnecting-americans-to-the-benefits-of-work>; “Expanding Work Requirements in Non-Cash Welfare Programs,” Council of Economic Advisers, July 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Expanding-Work-Requirements-in-Non-Cash-Welfare-Programs.pdf>.

³² Brian A. Jacob and Jens Ludwig, “The Effects of Housing Assistance on Labor Supply: Evidence from a Voucher Lottery,” *American Economic Review* 102, 1 (2012): 272-304, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.102.1.272>; Robert Collinson, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Jens Ludwig, “Low-Income Housing Policy,” Working Paper 21071, National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2015, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21071/w21071.pdf.

³³ Craig Garthwaite, Tal Gross, and Matthew J. Notowidigdo, “Public Health Insurance, Labor Supply, and Employment Lock,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, 2 (May 2014): 653–696, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qju005>; Laura Dague, Thomas DeLeire, and Lindsey Leininger, “The Effect of Public Insurance Coverage for Childless Adults on Labor Supply,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 9, 2 (May 2017): 124-54, DOI: 10.1257/pol.20150059; Thomas Buchmueller, John C. Ham, and Lara D. Shore-Sheppard, “The Medicaid Program,” Working Paper 21425, National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2015, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w21425/w21425.pdf.

³⁴ Hilary Williamson Hoynes and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, “Work Incentives and the Food Stamp Program,” *Journal of Public Economics* 96, 1-2 (February 2012): 151-162, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2011.08.006>.

³⁵ Chloe N. East, “Immigrants’ Labor Supply Response to Food Stamp Access,” *Labour Economics* 51 (2018): 202-226, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2018.01.003>.

³⁶ Rachel Sheffield and Scott Winship, “The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home.”

80 anti-poverty programs disincentivize marriage, particularly for lower-middle-income families.³⁷ Clear consensus on the effect of welfare on marriage and fertility is elusive, but the balance of evidence shows that welfare is negatively associated with marriage and positively associated with fertility, particularly among unwed mothers.³⁸ On a related question, there is evidence that housing and income subsidies decrease household sizes—likely reducing the number of multigenerational families living together and supporting each other.³⁹

There is also evidence that communities as a whole can be weakened by government intervention. Nobel Prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom’s research shows how external interventions can disrupt the delicate balance of learned norms by changing the relative payoffs for community cooperation. Her work studying the governance and management of water aquifers, forests, fisheries, and irrigation systems around the world, shows how in the absence of government intervention communities can learn new, welfare enhancing norms. They can engage in repetitive interactions that allow sustained cooperation toward a communal goal that would otherwise be unattainable if individuals acted independently.⁴⁰ These welfare-enhancing norms are a form of social capital.

A study of Nepalese farmers shows how they rely on shared social capital to devise rules that govern common water resources to increase

³⁷ Bradford Wilcox, Angela Rachidi, and Joseph Price, “Marriage, Penalized: Does Social-welfare Policy Affect Family Formation?” American Enterprise Institute, July 26, 2016, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/marriage-penalized-does-social-welfare-policy-affect-family-formation/>

³⁸ Jeff Grogger and Stephen G. Bronars, “The Effect of Welfare Payments on the Marriage and Fertility Behavior of Unwed Mothers: Results from a Twins Experiment,” *Journal of Political Economy* 109, No. 3 (June 2001), [Welfare, the Family, and Reproductive Behavior: Research Perspectives, Editor Robert Moffitt, National Research Council \(U.S.\) Committee on Population, National Academies Press, Washington D.C. 1998, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK230345/>.](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/321016?journalCode=jpe&)

³⁹ Ingrid Gould Ellen and Brendan O’Flaherty, “Social Programs and Household Size: Evidence from New York City,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 26, no. 4 (2007): 387–409, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40230983>.

⁴⁰ Elinor Ostrom, “Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems,” *American Economic Review* 100, no. 3 (2010): 641-72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27871226.pdf>; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

their land's productivity.⁴¹ Ostrom presents a game-theoretic model and supporting field-data to show that similar nearby irrigation systems governed by the Nepal Department of Irrigation (NDI) have worse outcomes for farmers and decreased farm production compared to the privately governed system. The government-involved NDI systems have worse outcomes despite large public subsidies and better technology.⁴² Ostrom concludes that the government subsidies disrupted the emergent process of rule development, bargaining, and repeated interaction among farmers that created the local social capital necessary to effectively cooperate on the community project.

A narrower, but related line of research, investigates how government spending crowds out non-profit activity. Daniel Hungerman exploits a provision of the 1996 welfare reform to estimate the causal effect of government spending on church activity, finding that a dollar of government welfare spending crowds out the equivalent of between 20 cents and 38 cents of church activity.⁴³ Using data from thousands of U.S. and Canadian charities, Abigail Payne and James Andreoni estimate that government grants crowd out as much as 75 percent of private donations to non-profits.⁴⁴ A majority of the measured effect is due to changes in fundraising tactics by the charities and the broader academic literature finds some conflicting results due to crowding in.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Elinor Ostrom and Roy Gardner, "Coping with Asymmetries in the Commons: Self-Governing Irrigation Systems Can Work," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7, No. 4 (Autumn, 1993): 93-112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2138503.pdf>.

⁴² Elinor Ostrom, "Social Capital: A Fad or a Fundamental Concept?" Indiana University Center for the Study of Institutions, Population and Environmental Change, 2000, pp. 172, and 173, and 195-198.

⁴³ Daniel M. Hungerman, "Are Church and State Substitutes? Evidence from the 1996 Welfare Reform," *Journal of Public Economics* 89, 11-12 (2005): 2245-67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2004.12.009>.

⁴⁴ James Andreoni and Abigail Payne, "Is Crowding Out Due Entirely to Fundraising? Evidence From a Panel of Charities," *Journal of Public Economics*, 95, 5-6 (2011): 334-43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.11.011>; James Andreoni and Abigail Payne, "Crowding-Out Charitable Contributions in Canada: New Knowledge From the North," NBER Working Paper No. 17635, December 2011, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w17635>; Abigail Payne, "Does the Government Crowd Out Private Donations? New Evidence From a Sample of Non-Profit Firms," *Journal of Public Economics*, 69, no. 3 (1998): 323-45, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S004727279800005X>.

⁴⁵ A 2016 meta-analysis showed that experimental studies, which can better control for other confounding effects, tend to show government support crowds out 64 percent of private donations while the remainder of the studies surveyed showed on average a small increase (crowding in) that was not statistically different from zero effect. Arjen De Wit and René Bekkers, "Government Support and Charitable Donations: A Meta-Analysis of the Crowding-Out Hypothesis," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 27, no. 2 (2017): 301-319, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muw044>; James Andreoni, "Do Government Grants to Charities

Where crowding in is observed, the funds may be new to the organization but there is no evidence that it represents an increase to the total pool of charitable giving and thus likely decreases funding to other charities, distorting the overall charitable landscape.

Across myriad government programs there is clear evidence that many different types of government spending directly reduce work, marriage, household size, charitable giving, and community cooperation. The next section shows that this negative relationship between social capital and government is evident in U.S. county-level data.

NEW EVIDENCE ON GOVERNMENT CROWD OUT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The microeconomic literature clearly shows that certain types of government interventions crowd out and distort social capital. The narrative history of U.S. government growth over time and simultaneous declining social capital is also consistent with government crowding out private association. The following section provides new cross-sectional evidence using the SCP's county-level SCI to show that counties where social capital is strongest rely less on government food aid. The section concludes by showing that state regulatory accumulation is also associated with lower social capital.

SNAP and Social Capital

Early theories of social capital crowd out predict that unearned, government-provided income will tend to reduce social connections, participation in mutual aid organizations, and other informal support networks. Cross-sectional research into this question from Europe finds conflicting or null results and suffers from a variety of methodological limitations. This section presents new data showing that uptake of U.S. government food aid is associated with lower social capital.

As a source of county-level government benefit program utilization we use the American Community Survey (ACS) 2010 5-year estimates of the share of households below 100 percent of the poverty line receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as food stamps.⁴⁶ Most households with incomes

Crowd Private Donations Out or In?" the NBER Reporter, No. 1, March 2019, <https://www.nber.org/reporter/2019number1/do-government-grants-charities-crowd-private-donations-out-or>.

⁴⁶ We use the 2010 estimates as they are most contemporaneous to the SCI data sources. Using the 2019 5-year estimates produces very similar results.

below 100 percent of the poverty line are eligible for SNAP and thus we are effectively measuring reported SNAP participation rates. Our measure of utilization has a few advantages. First, it helps control for differences in poverty rates and income across counties by excluding households above 100 percent of the poverty line. Second, unlike aggregate or average estimates of welfare spending, utilization measures the level of penetration of the government program into the lives of eligible individuals. If people do not use the program, it should not have any impact on their behavior. Third, county level data allow us to observe additional variation that is obscured when aggregating up to the state-level.

Figure 7 reports the share of households below the poverty line receiving SNAP in each county and that county's SCI score. The SCI, described in the first section of the report, represents the most detailed snapshot of social capital available using data that spans 2005 to 2016.⁴⁷ Figure 7 shows that counties with lower rates of reported SNAP uptake tend to have higher levels of social capital. County-level SNAP uptake and the SCI have a correlation of -0.40, with SNAP uptake explaining 16 percent of the variation in social capital. More than 70 percent of counties in the top decile of the SCI are in the bottom third of SNAP participation (those counties with the lowest uptake). The finding that less reliance on SNAP is associated with stronger social capital is the prediction of the crowd out hypothesis; people and communities that rely more heavily on government assistance for support will tend to have weaker connections to family and community.

⁴⁷ See Appendix Table A1a and A1b. "The Geography of Social Capital in America," U.S. Joint Economic Committee Republicans, 43-44.

Figure 7: Social Capital Index and Share of Households below 100 percent of Poverty Threshold Receiving SNAP by County



Sources: U.S. Senate Joint Economic Committee Republicans, Social Capital Project; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; JEC Calculations.

Note: Share of households receiving SNAP indicates the share of households that received SNAP in the past 12 months, from the 2006-2010 5-year pooled American Community Survey.

Figure 8 shows that this association holds for all four of the SCI sub-indices that have unique county-level data: family unity, community health, institutional health, and collective efficacy.⁴⁸ The top left panel shows the family unity sub-index with the most strongly negative correlation of -0.41, with SNAP uptake explaining 17 percent of the variation in family unity. The negative associations are also consistent among counties within each state (that is, accounting for state fixed effects), controlling for concerns about variation in reporting by state. The results are also all robust to logging and standardizing SNAP participation.

⁴⁸ The other three state-level sub-indices were not crated at the county level due to lack of data availability. "The Geography of Social Capital in America," U.S. Joint Economic Committee Republicans.

Figure 8: Social Capital Sub-Indexes and Share of Households below 100 percent of Poverty Threshold Receiving SNAP by County



Sources: U.S. Senate Joint Economic Committee Republicans, Social Capital Project; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey; JEC Calculations.

Note: Share of households receiving SNAP indicates the share of households that received SNAP in the past 12 months, from the 2006-2010 5-year pooled American Community Survey.

One advantage of using county-level data is that state-level data obscures important local-level variation in both social capital and the actual utilization of government programs. Measuring this additional variation is important since a significant portion of welfare policy is guided by federal laws which tend to homogenize regional differences. Other measures of government size at the state level do not show a systematic relationship with the SCI. However, the next section will show that state-level regulatory accumulation is associated with lower social capital.

Social capital is a multi-channel phenomenon that is hard to measure and poorly understood. At the county-level there is a consistently negative relationship between higher SNAP uptake and lower levels of social capital. Like other research on this question, the results are limited by imperfect data that must be interpreted carefully. It is also

not clear what causes what. For example, places with higher levels of social capital may have more robust non-governmental support structures and thus less need or desire to rely on SNAP. Or it might be that individuals who avail themselves of government benefits face new incentives that could lead to lower levels of social capital as measured through fewer marriages, more single-parent births, less religious and mutual benefit organization membership, and higher crime.

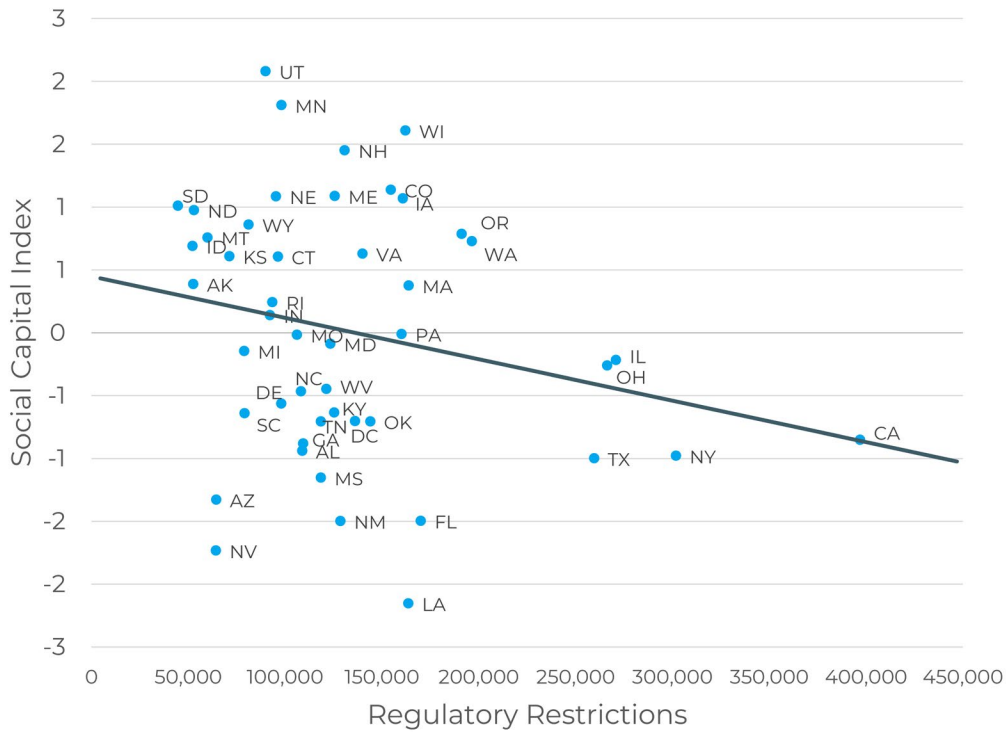
Regulation and Social Capital

Regulations represent a different measure of government size than spending or program uptake. If government activity crowds out private associations, we should expect to see places with more active regulatory states have lower levels of social capital.

In addition to the code of federal regulations, each U.S. state also has its own code of regulations which carry a similar force of law. There is a wide variation between states; South Dakota has the fewest restrictions (ranked 10th in the SCI), and California has the most regulatory restrictions (ranked 40th in the SCI). The wide variation in state level restrictions can help provide some insight into how regulations as a measure of government involvement may affect social capital.

Figure 9 plots the 47 states with available data on number of regulatory restrictions, against each state's SCI value and presents a simple regression trend. Although many states are clustered in a similar range of restrictions, there is an indication of a downward trend, with increases in regulations associated with lower social capital. These results are robust to logging and standardizing the number of restrictions.

Figure 9: Social Capital Index and Regulatory Restrictions by State



Source: QuantGov Reghub, The Mercatus Center at George Mason University; U.S. Senate Joint Economic Committee Republicans, Social Capital Project; JEC Calculations.

Note: Average number of restrictions by state is found as the mean value across all available years. Most recent year of available data ranges from 2017-2020, 2 states have only one year of data, the remainder have an average of 3.2 years available, and 3 states are missing (Arkansas, Hawaii, and Vermont).

CONCLUSION

The more than half-century decline of Americans' social capital is evident in atrophied connections to family, less vibrant communities, smaller faith groups, and fewer connections to work. These trends have negative consequences for peoples' physical health, mental well-being, and economic security.

A portion of the decline in social capital is likely driven by the growth of government. Government programs can replace the functions once carried out by networks of social connections and participation in mutual aid or religious organizations. As governments promulgate rules and distribute subsidies to manipulate an ever-increasing sphere of private life, it distorts those institutions and incentives that once formed the foundation for vibrant families, communities, congregations, and workplaces.

The explosive growth of the U.S. government through the 1960s and 1970s matches the contemporaneous inflection point and decline of social capital. Additional evidence shows that SNAP uptake is strongly correlated with lower social capital and the micro-economic literature supports a causal interpretation, showing that government transfer and grant programs lead to less work, fewer marriages, and weaker community institutions.

While the decline of social capital is a complex phenomenon, the contributing factor most directly in policymakers' control is the size and scope of the government. Perhaps the most direct and cost-effective option lawmakers have to reverse the tide of receding social connection is to streamline and scale back the myriad programs and regulatory progeny of congressional action that have accumulated over the past century.

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