

# CSI 8: Social Capital – Are we becoming lonelier and less civic?

## Summary

- Contrary to some descriptions of our time as ‘the age of loneliness’, supportive informal relationships have not in fact declined over the last two decades.
- However, having ‘someone to discuss personal matters with’ is much less likely among the over 75s, those with less education, and those outside the labour market. More generally, social capital is unequally distributed along the lines of ethnicity, age, education and economic activity
- The trend in volunteering has been broadly flat over the last decade but with a visible ‘Olympics effect’. Post-Olympics, volunteering returned to its previous level.
- Activity with voluntary organisations (or ‘civic participation’) appears to be in long-term slow decline; the Olympics may have also exerted a rejuvenating influence here, but a temporary one.
- Activity with voluntary organisations relating specifically to the local community or neighbourhood is in decline, falling from 11.5% to 7.8% over the last decade.
- There is some evidence that the ethnic gap in civic participation may be widening although the age gap has remained the same over time

---

## Introduction

Social capital is increasingly seen as an important resource for a society. While the definition of social capital is problematic, it is generally seen as a property of the social relationships and connections between citizens. The classic definition is that of Pierre Bourdieu “Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of ... relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”

† The concept of social capital provides some of the intellectual underpinnings of the Big Society programme of the coalition government, particularly with the Big Society themes of giving communities more powers, encouraging people to take an active role in their communities (volunteerism) and supporting co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises. “Our reform agenda is designed to empower communities to come together to address local issues .... Our ambition is for every adult in the country to be a member of an active neighbourhood group” (Conservative Party manifesto, 2010). The emphasis here is on the development of effective social capital in local neighbourhoods.

## Measuring Social Capital

The concept of social capital is often criticised as being too broad, too loose, or a catch-all phrase that is not very helpful. Here, we take the measures of social capital that have been the most studied in the past two decades such as membership of voluntary organizations. While this may appear an objective measure, there are important questions about the extent of actual involvement in the organizations, and it is important to distinguish active involvement from purely nominal membership. The literature shows that active involvement in religious institutions is also closely associated with a range of pro-social behaviours, and so should be included in addition to the standard voluntary organisations. Trust, both in general ‘others’ and in neighbours, has routinely been measured by scholars working on social capital.

There are difficulties in finding good measurements over a long time period. We use data from eight major national surveys in the UK (listed below); differences in question wording sometimes mean that estimates vary greatly between surveys. To make certain of our results, therefore, we compare outcomes from multiple data sources. If one tells us the trend is going up while another says the opposite, we can only draw the conclusion that “we can’t be sure”. We also run further analyses to make sure our findings are not driven by changes in the demographic make-up of the sample. All the results reported hold once accounting for age and gender. All the analyses use weights where possible to correct for bias and non-response in the samples.

The eight data sources used, and the *acronyms* by which they are referred to in the text, are as follows: those covering the whole of the UK are 1) British Household Panel Survey *BHPS*, 2) UK Household Longitudinal Survey *UKHLS* and 3) European Social Survey *ESS*. Just one survey relates to Great Britain: 4) British Social Attitudes *BSA*. The following sources cover England/ England and Wales only: 5) Citizenship Survey *CS*, 6) Community Life Survey *CLS*, 7) Taking Part Survey *TPS* and 8) Health Survey for England *HSE*. We check regional differences and find them to be small and thus assume findings to be applicable to the whole of the UK

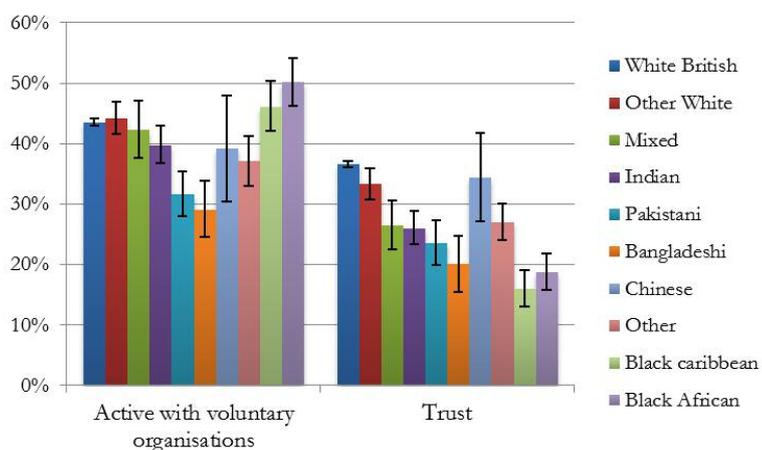
Social capital is often seen as providing advantages for the individual members of the relevant network (for example in facilitating access to better jobs), and thus in a sense excluding outsiders who are not part of the network. But it may also have wider social benefits, for example; by providing social support for those in need; or by fostering social trust (which can reduce ‘transaction costs’ in many spheres of life). It might thus be a wider ‘public good’. More generally, social connections are closely associated with people’s subjective sense of well-being. Given these societal and individual benefits, it is important to consider the distribution of social capital among different groups in society.

### Is social capital equally distributed among different groups in society?

#### Figure 1: There are significant ethnic differences in social capital

Data from UKHLS 2012 are used for comparisons between ethnic groups due to its large sample size. Not all indicators are available.

Some minority ethnic groups, notably those with Pakistani or Bangladeshi origins, have lower levels of social capital compared to white British on both indicators. For other groups the

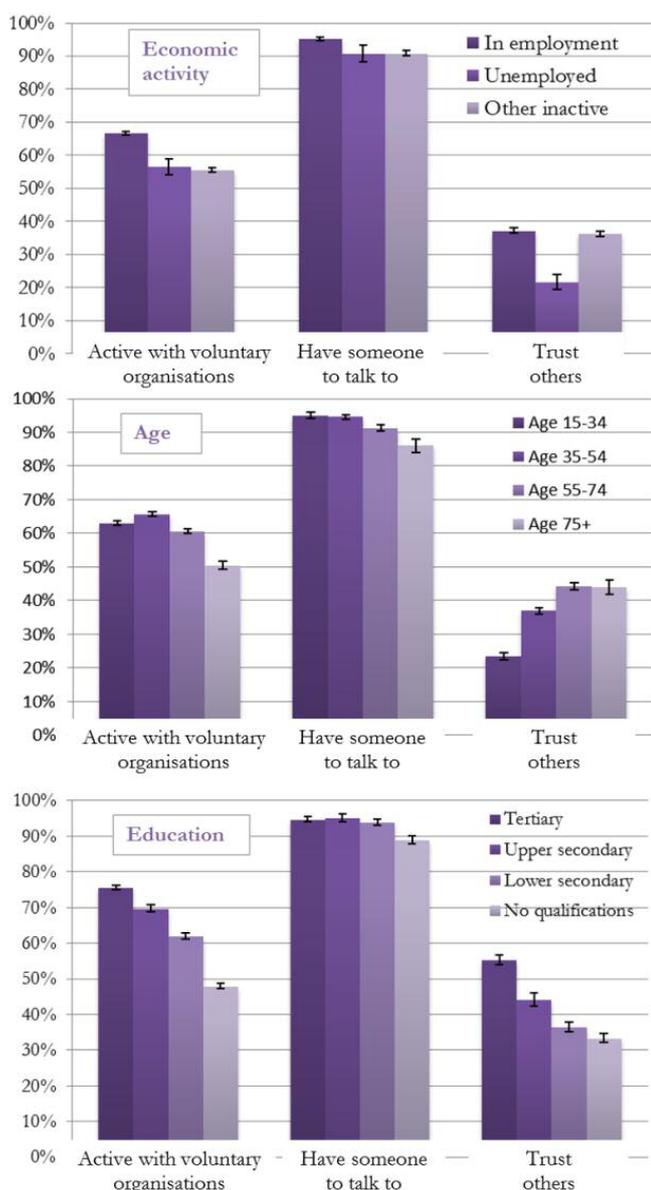


comparison differs across indicators: people of black Caribbean and black African background have high levels of engagement with voluntary organisations, but low levels of trusting others. All minority ethnic groups apart from Chinese are less likely than the white British to say that others can be trusted. These differences may reflect minority experiences of discrimination or stigmatization, or feelings of being treated as ‘outsiders’, but the explanation for the inequalities is not well understood.

Work provides opportunities for forging both formal and informal ties, and we can see that those in employment have high levels of social capital. The unemployed are less likely to agree that most others can be trusted (22% compared to 37% of those in work). There are also differences by age group and those aged 75 or over are less likely to engage in activity with voluntary organisations. The over 75s are also less likely to report that they have someone to talk to about personal matters – just 86% compared to 95% for the under 55s. However, it is younger people, not older, who are less likely to trust others. Finally, we look at differences by education and find an education gradient whereby each additional level of educational attainment is linked with higher likelihoods of trusting people or getting involved with voluntary organisations. For informal relationships, it is only those with no qualifications who are at increased risk of social isolation.

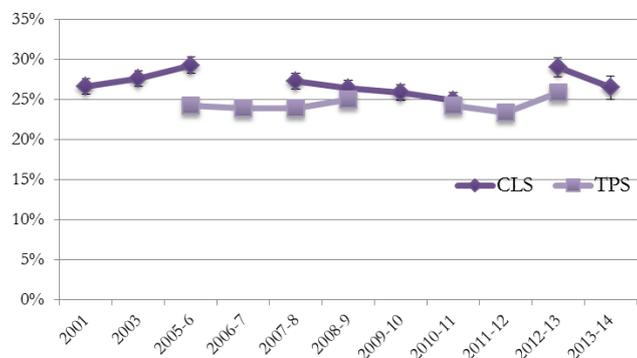
#### Figure 2: Social capital is unequally distributed along the lines of employment, age, and education

Mixed data sources: BSA, CS/CLS, ESS



## Is social capital in decline?

Many social commentators believe that social capital is in decline and have expressed concern that we seem to be dropping out of civic activities and are becoming more individualistic. This extends to our informal relationships and there is concern that we might be living in an ‘era of loneliness’<sup>ii</sup>. But are these worries justified? We explore how levels of various social and civic activities and feelings about our social connections have changed over time.



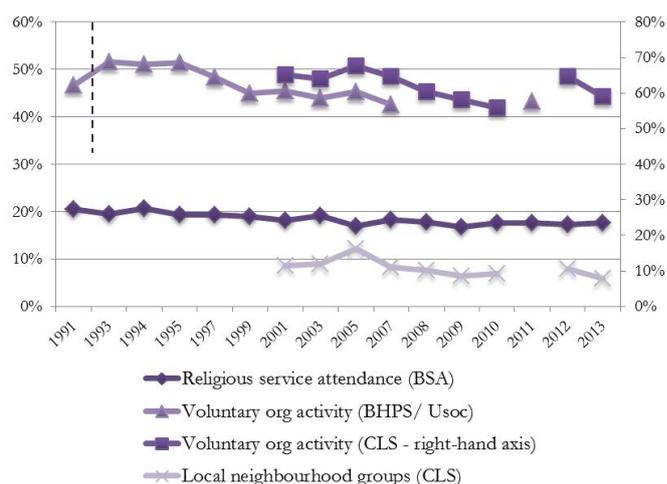
has been broadly flat. Both surveys show a significant increase in 2012-13 which probably reflects the large number of volunteers at the London 2012 Olympics<sup>iii</sup>.

## Civic participation

### Figure 4: Activity with voluntary organisations is in long term decline despite a revival in 2012

To explore trends in civic participation, we plot the proportion of the UK population who are active with at least one voluntary organisation (*Source: BHPS, UKHLS, CS/ CLS*) as well as activities specific to the local neighbourhood. We also compare this to attendance at religious services (*Source: BSA*).

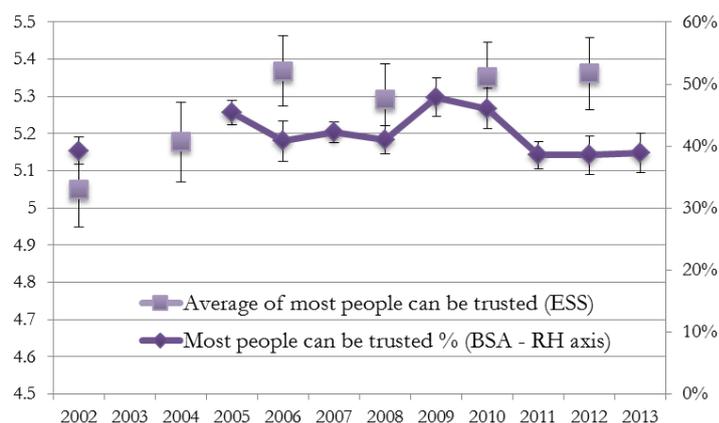
The number involved in voluntary organisations has been in slow steady decline over the past two decades (different question wording means we should discount BHPS 1991). Possibly the 2012 Olympics had a rejuvenating effect although the effect appears to have waned. Attendance at religious services, too, has been in long-term decline. However, this may now have levelled off with no further decline evident from 2005 onwards. Activity with ‘local community or neighbourhood groups’ as defined by the respondents is in decline<sup>iv</sup>, falling from 11.5% in 2001 to 7.8% in 2013/14. This decline in activity with local organisations is not accompanied by a decline in likelihood of trusting our neighbours (data not shown).



## Trust

### Figure 5: Different measures of trust provide conflicting evidence on the direction of change

We report a classic measure - the percentage agreeing that ‘most people can be trusted’ - from the BSA and compare it with a similar item from the ESS (which uses an 11-point scale). These two measures provide conflicting evidence on the direction of the trend in trust. Trust may be particularly susceptible to



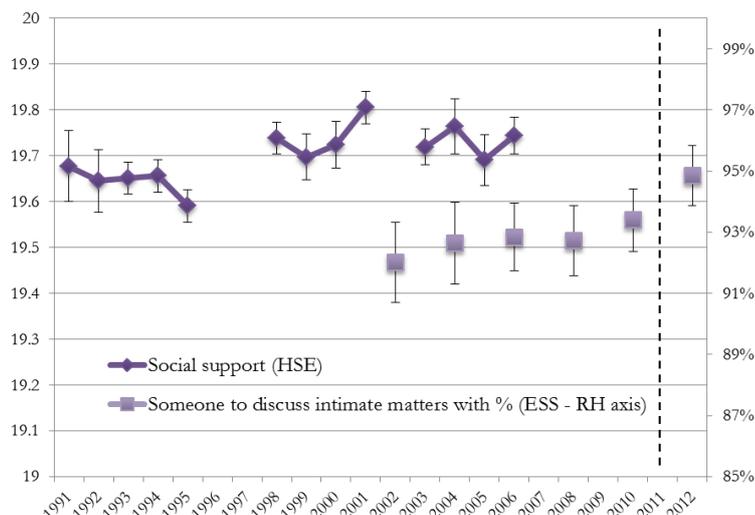
measurement error or to features of the survey. For example, trust was high in 2005, 2009 and 2010 but low in 2002 and between 2011 and 2013 according to the BSA but the ESS suggests that trust increased between 2002 and 2006, and since then has been steady.

### Informal Social Connections

#### Figure 6: There is no evidence that levels of social support are in overall decline

Data sources: HSE and ESS

We compare a *score* of social support, ascertained through responses to statements such as “There are people I know - amongst my family or friends - who can be relied on no matter what happens”, and the *percentage* having someone with whom to discuss ‘intimate and personal’ matters. The average social support score was stable in the early 1990s. Allowing for sampling error, the score in 1995 was not lower than in previous years. Average support then rose in 1998, with estimates often higher in the 2000s than in the early 1990s. Turning now to the alternative measure, we can see that between 2002 and 2010, the percentage of the UK population having at least one person to discuss personal matters with increased from 92.0% to 93.4%. As the error bars overlap, these estimates are not statistically different from each other; however, they perhaps suggest a slight upward trend. In 2012, the percentage climbed to 94.9%. However, this estimate comes from a differently-worded question to the earlier years and as such should be treated with caution.

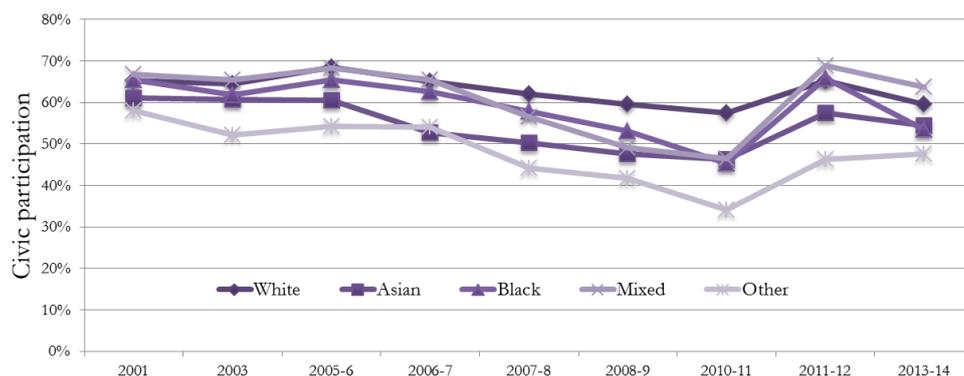


### Is social capital becoming more or less equally distributed over time?

Finally, we come back to the ‘distribution issue’, and explore whether social capital is becoming more or less equally distributed along the lines of ethnicity and other social divides. There is some weak evidence to suggest growing divides by education, but no evidence that the over 75s have become more isolated over the last decade (data not shown). There is some suggestion that civic participation might be becoming more divided along the lines of ethnicity as shown in Figure 7.

#### Figure 7: The ethnicity/ civic participation gap appears to be growing

Due to data limitations we use a less detailed categorisation of ethnicity here. Source: CS/CLS



Author: Lindsay Richards [Lindsay.richards@nuffield.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Lindsay.richards@nuffield.ox.ac.uk)

Publication date: March 2015

<sup>i</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The Forms of Capital* in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.

<sup>ii</sup> “The age of loneliness is killing us” Monbiot, G. in The Guardian 14<sup>th</sup> Oct 2014 /Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone* (2000)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/news/london-2012-olympics-success-down-to-70000-volunteers-8030867.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Note that other groups such as those working with children or the elderly are likely to be local in nature as well, but here we focus on local community or neighbourhood groups for clarity and over-time comparability

