



Fostering Community Connections for Newcomers: Building Social Capital

Recently resettled groups often face a multitude of stressors throughout their migration journey and in their new environment, which can limit their ability to seek out others in their community. Additionally, the settings they came from may have harbored conflict, persecution, and displacement, breaking up families and social networks and developing distrust of others.¹ This resource provides guidance for service providers and agencies on how to unite communities and build social capital through culturally considerate events and programming.

Organization as a Key Link

Resettlement agencies play an important role in **bridging the gaps** between newcomer groups and the larger community, as well as between newcomers and members of their own community. These organizations are the first to meet with newly arrived individuals and families, providing economic, health care, and acculturative resources. At times, they may serve as

the **single social support** that an individual or family has in their new setting. Refugee and asylum seeker-focused non-governmental organizations are often the primary resource for aid in connecting refugees and newcomers with their new communities.² Because resettlement agencies and their staff serve as a key source of community connection, they are well positioned to offer valuable support to newcomers in building social capital.

¹ Pittaway, E. E., Bartolomei, L., & Doney, G. (2016). The glue that binds: An exploration of the way resettled refugee communities define and experience social capital. *Community Development Journal*, 51(3), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsv023>
² Ziersch, A., Walsh, M., & Due, C. (2023). 'Having a good friend, a good neighbour, can help you find yourself': Social capital and integration for people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(15), 3877–3899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2177628>

“Refugee community organizations are recognized as important vehicles for promoting refugee voices, reducing isolation and fostering cultural connection and cultural maintenance.”

– Pittaway et al. (2016)

What is Social Capital?^{1,3}

Social capital “is generally understood as referring to **social relationships, connections, networks, and resources that exist within a community, as well as the norms that govern social interaction, such as trust and cooperation.**”¹ In the resettlement context, social capital is affected by a number of factors, such as the socio-political environment. Numerous studies have found that social capital and social cohesion are associated with refugees’ health and emotional well-being.³

Social capital can be grouped into three different categories:

Types of social capital⁴

- **Bonding capital:** “social connections within one’s own social or ethnic group or immediate neighborhood”
- **Bridging capital:** “horizontal connections to people and groups in the wider community”
- **Linking capital:** “vertical connections to people in positions of authority”

Benefits of Building Social Capital

Refugee and other newcomer groups, who may not have a strong support system in place when they arrive, can benefit greatly from engaging with the community. Having a **reliable network** can positively influence the overall well-being of newcomers and can aid in alleviating everyday stressors of resettlement.

Physical and Practical Support

Newcomer individuals and families have found that community connections can provide support in unexpected ways. **Support from fellow refugees (bonding capital)** was identified as powerful in that there is a shared experience or culture and an inherent desire to support each other through acculturative and other stressors.⁴ This could include **practical assistance**, such as providing informal interpretation services, helping with child care needs, giving advice and recommendations on new or difficult situations, offering transportation, and connecting people with larger communities and resources.^{5,6}

“Research has shown that survivors of crises such as refugees use social capital to help rebuild a sense of normality.”

- Villalonga-Olives et al. (2022)

Impact on Mental Health

In addition to physical and practical support, bonding social capital can help newcomers attain **emotional support**. Connection with community members from the same ethnic group may be a key resource for newcomers in coping with issues of grief and loss, stress, and mental health.⁶

³ Villalonga-Olives, E., Wind, T. R., Armand, A. O., Yirefu, M., Smith, R., & Aldrich, D. P. (2022). Social-capital-based mental health interventions for refugees: A systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 301, 114787. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114787>

⁴ Bletscher, C., & Spiers, S. (2023). “Step by step we were okay now”: An exploration of the impact of social connectedness on the well-being of Congolese and Iraqi refugee women resettled in the United States. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(7), 5324. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20075324>

⁵ Betancourt, T. S., Frounfelker, R., Mishra, T., Hussein, A., & Falzarano, R. (2015). Addressing health disparities in the mental health of refugee children and adolescents through community-based participatory research: A study in 2 communities. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(S3), S475–S482. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302504>

⁶ Ziersch, A., Walsh, M., & Due, C. (2023). ‘Having a good friend, a good neighbour, can help you find yourself’: Social capital and integration for people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(15), 3877–3899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2177628>

Studies have shown an association between psychological symptoms and community engagement, with findings generally indicating higher symptoms being associated with lower engagement.⁷ Specifically, **social support from refugees' own communities is associated with lower depression and anxiety symptoms.**⁷ This can be attributed to several factors, such as the emotional support of having someone to talk to about problems, **the sense of belonging** that comes with social connectedness, and the practical support mentioned previously that helps alleviate daily stressors.

Displaced Women and Social Support⁴

Refugee and newcomer women face unique challenges in resettlement compared to their male counterparts and, as a result, have a **higher risk of developing mental health problems.** These barriers include fear and persecution, gender-based discrimination, cultural gender role expectations, and physical/sexual violence.

A study conducted in the U.S. used focus groups with Iraqi and Congolese resettled refugee women to learn more about **perceptions of social connectedness and belonging in post-resettlement** among resettled women.

Both cultural groups expressed a strong sense of **isolation** and difficulty fostering social connections when they first arrived, which ultimately led to **loneliness and emotional distress.** In particular, for the Congolese participants, supportive female connections provided **hope and guidance** for the future. Iraqi women reported a strong bond in particular with fellow refugees, as they understand the challenges faced in resettlement and hold a **desire to support one another** through these difficulties.

Social Capital-Building Ideas for Organizations^{5,8,9}

There are many ways that resettlement organizations can promote the building of social capital among newcomers, including the following:

- **Educational programs and workshops** bring people together to learn about an important subject that the organization sees a need to address within the community. Examples include educational seminars on a health-related topic, resource sharing, or cultural orientations.
- **Cultural events** can encompass a wide range of community engagement opportunities, including religious celebrations like Eid, international or ethnic-based festivals, group potlucks, and gatherings for national holidays.
- **Peer support groups** provide opportunities to explore topics like mental health in an intimate group setting with individuals who have similar experiences or identities.
- **Community advisory boards** allow a space for leaders from a cultural group to come together for the purpose of addressing needs and problems in the community, guiding and co-leading projects involving their community, and evaluating organization policies.

Cultural Considerations

As you explore the possibilities of bringing members of a community or multiple communities together, it is important to remember that there is **not a “one size fits all”** method to planning. What one cultural group prefers for social events or programming may not be the same as what another group would prefer. It is also essential to keep in mind the specific dynamics of a community and how they may impact engagement.

Demographic Factors^{1,6}

In planning for social events or programming for a cultural group or multiple groups, keep the following factors in mind:

⁷ Nickerson, A., Liddell, B. J., Keegan, D., Edwards, B., Felmingham, K. L., Forbes, D., Hadzi-Pavlovic, D., McFarlane, A. C., O'Donnell, M., Silove, D., Steel, Z., Van Hooff, M., & Bryant, R. A. (2019). Longitudinal association between trust, psychological symptoms and community engagement in resettled refugees. *Psychological Medicine*, 49(10), 1661–1669. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291718002246>

⁸ Almohamed, A., & Vyas, D. (2019). Rebuilding social capital in refugees and asylum seekers. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 26(6), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3364996>

⁹ Ellis, B. H., Kia-Keating, M., Yusuf, S. A., Lincoln, A., & Nur, A. (2007). Ethical research in refugee communities and the use of community participatory methods. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 44(3), 459–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461507081642>

- **Gender norms** within a community may impact the ability for participants to engage. For example, women may be more comfortable in gender-specific events and programs geared to them.
- The **socioeconomic situation** could limit individuals' and families' ability to access or engage with the community if they are occupied with their jobs and unable to make time for socialization or if they cannot afford transportation to the program location. Try to organize programs and events to accommodate work schedules, and choose locations that are accessible by public transportation if possible. Also check if your organization has the capacity to provide direct transportation for participants. Organizing carpools between volunteers and community members can also overcome transportation barriers.
- **Religion and belief systems** can inform whether a social intervention, program, or event is appropriate for a specific resettled community.
- The **language** that people speak will greatly impact their ability to engage in any socialization. Ensure that community members are able to communicate in a unifying language or that appropriate interpretation is available.
- **Ethnic tensions and conflicts** within a community or between communities must be considered, as the dynamics could create more isolation than cohesion, especially for minority groups.

Multi-cultural Connections

While it is beneficial to engage in one's own community to assist with integration in a new homeland, findings have suggested that **engagement between different cultural groups** can help increase trust in the larger community and provide more opportunities for emotional and practical support.^{4,10} **Bridging social capital** within resettled groups can be best facilitated through community-based organizations like resettlement agencies or religious organizations that harbor a diverse network of newcomers.⁶ This [resource created by Community Toolbox](#) provides culturally

sensitive insight and ideas for those who want to learn more about how to promote multicultural collaboration in their communities.

Bringing Together New Arrivals Through Refugee Supper Clubs⁸

One practice being implemented across the globe for migrants is for community organizations to host "**supper clubs**" in which newly resettled community members can come together and share cultural dishes. One organization, Miry's List, based in Los Angeles, has noted that the monthly event has empowered newcomers in their community through **sharing culinary skills** and has been a **space for fostering connections** with people from all different backgrounds in the community.

Social Capital-Building Strategies

The following are recommendations for organizers looking to plan and execute community-enhancing events or programming:

- **Engage with local community partners and organizations.** This can include schools, religious organizations, and neighborhood groups.⁶ Partnering with another organization allows the **pooling of resources** and can be a key **way to reach community members**. For example, it could be beneficial to work with a local mosque when planning a cultural event like Eid for the resettled Muslim community. Partnering with another organization can also be effective for educational opportunities, such as collaborating with a local health care facility to provide information on a topic such as diabetes management.
- **Be mindful of resource limitations.** Before planning a program or event, make sure to account for all the expenses and resources that may be involved, and check if your agency can support them. Ask yourself questions like:

¹⁰ Parvini, Sarah. (2019, May 31). Must Reads: At this L.A. supper club, refugees share food and memories of the lives they left behind. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-supper-club-immigrant-dinner-mirys-list-refugee-migrant-20190531-htmllstory.html>

- Do we have the funding for this event/program?
 - Do we have the space to host the community?
 - How many people can we host?
 - What materials will we need?
 - Do we have the staff to support this event/program?
- **Assess the desires and needs** of the community or communities you want to bring together. Are you noticing a **pattern of behaviors** in the individuals and families that you serve that you think needs addressing? For example, if you have observed an uptick in domestic violence incidents among resettled women served by the agency, you may consider developing a women’s group for survivors of intimate partner violence.
 - **Practice cultural sensitivity** while planning and advertising an event. Do research about the community if need be to limit ethnic tensions or conflict. Ensure that people are understanding the intention of an event or program and that it will take place in a safe and comfortable space.

For more ideas to strategically build social capital, see the [Building Meaningful Contact](#) how-to guide from Welcoming America.

Conclusion

Many newcomers experience isolation and withdrawal upon resettlement, and their only social connection is with the agency and providers serving them. Because of this, resettlement agencies are uniquely positioned to help newcomers build social capital within their own community, with other resettled cultural groups, and with the larger community where they live. To increase the potential for successful building of social capital, organizations and service providers hosting gatherings should approach the planning process with a culturally sensitive lens.

Resources

[A Resource List on Community Engagement](#): This Switchboard blog post contains resources for outreach and engaging with diverse communities.


[What Strategies Can Help Newcomers with Social Integration?](#): This Switchboard evidence summary highlights studies that indicate the importance of peer support groups in building social capital for newcomers.

[Taste of Belonging: A Collection of Recipes and Ways to Strengthen Community Across Differences](#): This toolkit and cookbook created by Welcome America provides information on building connections and decreasing prejudice in communities with best practices for strengthening community across differences.

[The Glue that Binds: An Exploration of the Way Resettled Communities Define and Experience Social Capital](#): This journal article describes participatory research that highlights newcomers’ experience with social capital. The study provides recommendations on how to best build social capital with new arrivals and the cultural factors that must be considered when bringing together one or more communities.

[Engaging Local Leaders to Foster Welcoming Communities](#): This guide by Welcoming America provides information on how to build inclusive communities using community leaders’ support.

[What Works to Build Welcoming and Inclusive Communities?](#): This Switchboard evidence summary describes interventions that have been shown to be effective in developing supportive communities for newcomers.



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