



SARA Law Research Center

International Journal of Legal and Social Order, <https://www.ccdsara.ro/ijlso>

ISSN 2821 – 4161 (Online), ISSN 2810-4188 (Print), ISSN-L 2810-4188

Nº. 1 (2024), pp. 345-355

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

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Received 10.11.2024; accepted 19.12.2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55516/ijlso.v4i1.228>

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Abstract

Social capital plays a crucial role in strengthening public security by influencing both the perception and reality of safety within a community. This complex concept, defined by mutual trust, social networks, and norms of reciprocity, facilitates cooperation between citizens and authorities, contributing to crime reduction and enhanced community resilience. In a community with high social capital, the perception of safety is improved through trust in neighbors and law enforcement institutions, encouraging citizens to engage actively in community life and collaborate in risk prevention. Local social networks, whether offline or online, play an important role in sharing relevant information, discouraging antisocial behavior, and mobilizing resources in emergencies. However, the perception of safety, often influenced by media and social networks, can amplify fear of insecurity even in the absence of real risks, leading to social isolation and fragmentation. In such situations, transparent communication from authorities and community policing initiatives are essential for restoring trust and a sense of security. Thus, social capital supports both a positive perception of safety and actual security by fostering united, responsible communities capable of managing security risks effectively.

Key words: *Social capital, public security, perception, social networks, community resilience, trust.*

INTRODUCTION

Public security is one of the essential priorities of any modern society, with a direct impact on citizens' quality of life, economic development, and social stability. Given today's societal complexities, public security extends beyond the intervention of authorities alone; it is the result of extensive collaboration between citizens and institutions. In this context, the concept of social capital has become increasingly relevant in understanding and enhancing public safety. Social capital, defined as the network of social ties, mutual trust, and reciprocity norms among community members, is a fundamental element in fostering a positive perception of safety and supporting proactive behaviors in the face of security risks.

The link between social capital and public security manifests through several channels. First, the level of trust among citizens directly influences how they perceive risk and safety within their community. A united community where people trust one another and are willing to cooperate will feel safer and be more inclined to support authorities in crime prevention and control activities. Conversely, in a community where trust is low and social relations are fragile, citizens perceive higher risk and are less willing to actively engage in maintaining public safety.

Another important aspect is the norms of reciprocity and cooperation that emerge within a community with high social capital. These norms generate a sense of collective responsibility, discouraging antisocial behavior and encouraging active citizen involvement in community surveillance and support. Social networks and relationships also play a crucial role by facilitating communication and rapid information exchange about potential security incidents, thus preventing the escalation of risky situations.

In the absence of adequate social capital, communities become more vulnerable, and interventions by authorities become more challenging and costly. A community with low social capital is more prone to uncertainty and fear, even in the absence of concrete dangers, as social relationships and mutual support are diminished, leaving citizens isolated and reluctant to participate in security initiatives.

This paper aims to explore how social capital influences both citizens' perception of public security and its reality, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and collaboration among citizens in building a safer and more resilient community against modern threats.

I. DEFINING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS COMPONENTS" IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS IMPACT ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

Social capital is an essential concept for understanding social dynamics and how interpersonal relationships contribute to community cohesion and the creation of a sense of public safety. Social capital can be defined as the set of resources available within a community—such as trust among citizens,

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

relationship networks, and norms of reciprocity—that facilitate collective action. "Social capital is not merely the sum of individual connections but refers to the social bonds, norms, and trust that enable coordinated and mutually beneficial cooperation" (*Putnam, 2000*). In the context of public security, social capital plays a crucial role by enhancing collaboration between citizens and institutions, reducing crime rates, and increasing the sense of safety.

Social capital can be divided into several components, each playing a specific role in influencing the perception and reality of public security:

Trust between Citizens and in Public Institutions: Trust is the central element in forming a solid social capital. In communities where people trust each other and public authorities (police, firefighters, emergency services), there is a heightened perception of safety. "Trust is the foundation of a united community and an essential factor in public security" (*Coleman, 1988*). Trust in public institutions encourages citizens to cooperate with them, while mutual trust among citizens reduces tensions and interpersonal violence.

Networks of Relationships and Social Bonds: Social networks (family, friends, neighbors) form the foundation of social capital, enabling rapid information sharing about security incidents and helping the community stay informed and prepared. "Strong social bonds increase communities' capacity to address security issues" (*Putnam, 2000*). Social networks also provide emotional support, enhancing community resilience in the face of threats.

Norms of Reciprocity and Cooperation: Norms of reciprocity—the tendency to help and receive help from others—are fundamental to maintaining public security. "Reciprocity generates an atmosphere of trust and support that discourages antisocial behavior and encourages cooperation" (Bourdieu, 1986). In communities where reciprocity norms are well-developed, citizens are more willing to help each other in the face of dangers and collaborate with authorities in crisis situations.

Measuring social capital can be done through indicators such as the level of trust among citizens, frequency of social interactions, involvement in volunteer activities, and participation in community events. "Social capital is measured through trust relationships and the degree of interaction among community members" (*Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007*).

A high social capital indicator may be a low crime rate in communities where citizens know each other and cooperate. Studies show that "where people have strong social bonds, crime rates are lower, and the quality of life is perceived as higher" (*Putnam, 2000*).

In communities with high social capital, the perception of safety is stronger because citizens feel they are not alone and can rely on each other in risky situations. "The perception of safety is reinforced by mutual trust and shared support within a cohesive community" (*Kapucu, 2006*). This perception

encourages citizens to stay vigilant and cooperate with authorities, contributing to improved actual safety.

In communities where social capital is weak, trust bonds are more fragile, and citizens tend to be less willing to collaborate with the police or other public safety institutions. "Low social capital increases a community's vulnerability to security risks and reduces its ability to handle threats" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*). Isolated communities, where residents are unfamiliar with each other and do not interact, are more vulnerable to criminal activities, as offenders perceive a low probability of intervention or reporting of suspicious activities.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL TRUST AND THE PERCEPTION OF SECURITY

Social trust is a central element of social capital and plays an essential role in shaping the perception of safety within a community. People tend to feel safer when they trust those around them, whether neighbors, colleagues, or public authorities. "Social trust enhances the sense of safety and strengthens cooperation among citizens to maintain a secure environment" (*Putnam, 2000*). This trust facilitates cooperation and paves the way for a more united community where citizens collaborate to prevent and address security risks. This phenomenon significantly impacts the perception of public security and even actual safety, as citizens who trust each other and public order institutions are more likely to become actively involved in protecting their community.

In a community with a high level of trust among citizens, people are less concerned about potential external threats and feel secure. For instance, in a community where people know their neighbors and feel that they would help in case of danger, the perception of safety is enhanced. "Trust in neighbors and mutual support increase the perception of safety and reduce anxiety about potential threats" (*Coleman, 1988*). Conversely, in areas where social relationships are weak and citizens do not know or trust their neighbors, the sense of insecurity rises even in the absence of evident threats.

In a community where citizens trust each other, they are more likely to cooperate to discourage antisocial behaviors such as vandalism, theft, or disruptive conduct. "A united community, where mutual trust is strong, can reduce crime risk, as people are more likely to intervene and support each other" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*).

Trust in public authorities, particularly the police and other security institutions, contributes to a more positive perception of public security. "When citizens trust the police, they are more willing to cooperate, report incidents, and engage in public order maintenance efforts" (*Kapucu, 2006*). Conversely, when trust in authorities is low, citizens may be reluctant to seek their assistance, which can increase the risk of criminal activities.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

In communities where authorities are perceived as efficient and trustworthy, citizens feel that their security is well-protected, thus enhancing the general sense of safety. "An effective and transparent institution strengthens citizens' perception of safety and reduces anxiety about security risks" (*Putnam, 2000*). Community policing initiatives and neighborhood patrols are examples of practices that improve the perception of safety and support trust between citizens and authorities.

Typically, in rural communities where people know each other and interact more frequently, the level of social trust is higher, and the perception of safety is more positive. "In rural communities, where social bonds are strong, the sense of safety is greater, and crime rates are lower" (Coleman, 1988). In large cities, where interpersonal relationships are weaker and people have fewer social ties, the perception of safety is reduced.

In neighborhoods with high social capital, people tend to feel safer and are more willing to collaborate with each other and with authorities. By contrast, marginalized neighborhoods with weakly developed social capital are more vulnerable to crime, and the perception of safety is lower. "Differences in levels of social capital affect not only the crime rate but also how citizens perceive safety within their community" (*Sampson et al., 1997*).

III. THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL SOCIAL NETWORKS ON PUBLIC SECURITY

Local social networks, both offline and online, play a significant role in enhancing public security by facilitating communication and collaboration among citizens. Within a community, local social networks—which include family ties, friendships, neighborhood relationships, and online communities—enable the rapid exchange of information, fostering a sense of solidarity and social cohesion. These networks are fundamental in building strong social capital, which contributes to a positive perception of safety and reduces actual security risks. "In a community with well-established social networks, citizens are better informed, more united, and more capable of acting together to prevent and address security incidents" (*Putnam, 2000*).

Neighborhood networks facilitate the informal monitoring of public spaces and residential areas. People who have social ties with their neighbors and interact frequently are more attentive to what is happening around them, making them more likely to notice suspicious activities. "People with strong social ties are more likely to step in to help their neighbors and cooperate to reduce risks" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*). In a vigilant community, offenders are discouraged from acting, knowing they are being monitored by neighbors who communicate with each other and are willing to report suspicious activities to authorities.

Neighborhood networks support the rapid exchange of relevant security information, such as alerts about potential incidents, safety tips, and risk

prevention recommendations. "This communication among neighbors enhances perceived safety and creates an atmosphere of solidarity within the community" (Coleman, 1988).

In communities with high social capital, local social networks often include organizations and citizen groups actively involved in monitoring safety and reporting incidents. These "watchdog" initiatives involve volunteer citizens who patrol certain areas or ensure that neighbors adhere to security guidelines. "These groups can work effectively with the police and other authorities to create a more robust public security system" (Bourdieu, 1986).

Local civic groups often organize activities and social events that help strengthen bonds among members and reinforce social capital. Such events, like local fairs, neighborhood festivals, or regular meetings, contribute to "building trust and increasing mutual acquaintance among citizens, which has a positive impact on public security" (Putnam, 2000).

With the rise of online social networks, many communities have created dedicated groups on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, or Nextdoor. "These groups facilitate rapid communication among members, allowing them to stay informed in real-time about security incidents, share advice, and collaborate to protect the community" (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007).

Online social networks enable rapid mobilization in emergency situations, such as natural disasters, major accidents, or serious security incidents. "Through messaging platforms, citizens can communicate in real-time and coordinate relief efforts" (Kapucu, 2006). Such examples demonstrate how online social networks contribute to enhancing security and increasing community resilience.

Social networks, whether online or offline, help "keep citizens consistently informed, contributing to a heightened sense of safety" (Putnam, 2000). Citizens who are well-informed about incidents in their community and who know that neighbors are vigilant and willing to collaborate have a more positive perception of safety.

IV. COMMUNITY AND THE REALITY OF SAFETY: HOW SOCIAL COHESION CONTRIBUTES TO CRIME REDUCTION

Social cohesion is a central aspect of social capital, defined by strong bonds among members, a sense of belonging, and norms of collaboration and mutual support. Cohesive communities are characterized by high solidarity, creating a "social shield" against antisocial behavior and crime. "High social capital contributes to mobilizing citizens to maintain a safe environment and to prevent antisocial behavior" (Putnam, 2000). By strengthening social cohesion, citizens become more aware of their shared responsibility for community safety and are more willing to collaborate in maintaining a secure environment.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

"Communities with strong social cohesion have a lower incidence of crime" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*). In a cohesive community, citizens tend to monitor public spaces and engage actively in neighborhood surveillance, which discourages criminal activities. Conversely, in fragmented communities where social ties are weak and citizens are not well-acquainted, crime rates tend to be higher, as offenders perceive a lack of supervision and unity.

Sampson et al. (1997) introduced the term "collective efficacy" to describe a community's ability to maintain order and safety through social cooperation. Collective efficacy manifests through "informal social surveillance and the willingness of citizens to intervene in support of neighbors and the community" (*Sampson et al., 1997*). In this way, social cohesion contributes to crime reduction, as citizens feel they can rely on each other in times of crisis.

In communities with high social capital, well-established norms of reciprocity mean that "people are willing to help each other and fulfill their obligations to other community members" (*Coleman, 1988*). These social norms discourage antisocial behavior and support a climate of respect and mutual responsibility, essential factors for reducing crime.

In cohesive communities, shared values—such as mutual respect, tolerance, and support—lay the foundation for a stable and safe social environment. "When citizens share common values and feel part of a community, they are more inclined to work together to maintain safety" (*Putnam, 2000*). Thus, offenders are discouraged from committing crimes in a community with strong social cohesion, knowing that citizens are attentive and engaged.

Civic involvement, including participation in volunteer activities and community initiatives, contributes to increased social cohesion and crime reduction. "Citizens who engage in volunteer activities feel a greater responsibility for their community and are more likely to intervene in incidents" (*Bourdieu, 1986*). These activities build bonds among citizens and reinforce solidarity, contributing to more robust public safety.

Safety programs, such as neighborhood patrols or "Neighbourhood Watch" projects, are concrete examples of how civic engagement can reduce crime. "These programs demonstrate that civic engagement is a crucial factor in crime prevention" (*Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007*).

Studies show that rural communities with strong social ties generally have lower crime rates compared to less cohesive urban areas. "In rural areas, social relationships are stronger, and citizens tend to be more aware of what is happening around them, contributing to a safer environment" (*Coleman, 1988*). In middle-class neighborhoods with strong civic initiatives and active citizen participation, social cohesion is a key factor in crime prevention and public order maintenance.

V. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CRISIS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Social capital plays a vital role in managing crises and emergencies, providing a support network and resources for communities facing major threats, such as natural disasters, security incidents, or public health emergencies. Communities with high social capital are more resilient in crises due to strong support networks and norms of reciprocity, enabling them to mobilize resources quickly and support affected members. "Social capital contributes to mobilizing citizens in times of crisis, facilitating the coordination and cooperation needed to address unexpected events" (*Kapucu, 2006*).

During a crisis, neighborhood networks and informal relationships are essential for a community's quick and effective response. People connected through strong social relationships are more likely to offer and receive help in an emergency. "People with strong social ties are more inclined to intervene to help their neighbors and cooperate to reduce risks" (*Putnam, 2000*). These trusted social bonds thus facilitate a prompt and coordinated response to crisis events.

Today, online social networks have become a crucial communication channel during crises, allowing citizens to quickly share relevant information and seek help. Studies show that "online networks enhance social capital by informing citizens and mobilizing resources in real time" (*Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007*). This type of communication helps spread information quickly about safe locations, available resources, and potential dangers, aiding community coordination during a crisis.

In communities with high social capital, norms of reciprocity-where people are willing to offer help, trusting they will also receive support when needed-are well-established. These norms are fundamental in crisis management, providing a "framework for mutual support and community aid" (*Coleman, 1988*). During an emergency, this solidarity reduces anxiety and supports community cohesion, thereby enhancing resilience and recovery capacity.

Resource Mobilization through Mutual Support: Faced with disaster, communities with high social capital can mobilize resources more quickly and effectively than those with weaker social ties. "When community members are accustomed to collaborating and sharing resources, they can better handle crisis situations" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*). For example, during natural disasters, people may coordinate rescue or relief efforts, distributing available resources and ensuring that all vulnerable members receive necessary assistance.

Collective efficacy, defined as a community's ability to organize to maintain order and respond to crises, is closely tied to social capital. "A community with high collective efficacy is better equipped to manage crises and collaborate to minimize damage" (*Sampson et al., 1997*). Collective efficacy strengthens a community's capacity to respond in emergencies, as citizens are accustomed to working together for the common good.

In communities with high social capital, collaboration between citizens and authorities is more efficient. Citizens are more willing to follow imposed

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

measures and actively engage in crisis management, "motivated by trust in public institutions and responsibility toward fellow community members" (*Kapucu, 2006*). For example, in cases of fire, earthquake, or other disasters, collaboration between citizens and emergency services increases response efficiency and mitigates negative impacts on the community.

A well-known example is the response of Japanese communities during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. "Due to social cohesion and high social capital, many communities were able to mobilize quickly, coordinate rescue efforts, and reduce the disaster's impact on their members" (*Aldrich, 2012*). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social capital played a crucial role in supporting community members affected. "Communities with strong social ties rapidly organized relief initiatives for vulnerable individuals, facilitating access to food, medicine, and emotional support" (*Putnam, 2020*). This example underscores the importance of social capital in resource mobilization and community support during health crises.

Social capital is an essential factor in crisis management and ensuring community resilience in emergencies. Through local social networks, norms of reciprocity, and collective efficacy, communities with high social capital are better equipped to face crises and recover from critical events. Examples worldwide show that, in resilient communities, citizens are more willing to collaborate, support one another, and work with authorities, reducing the negative impact of crises. In this sense, investing in social capital is an effective strategy for strengthening response capacity and protecting community safety against modern risks.

VI. PERCEPTION VS. REALITY OF SAFETY: HOW CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF SECURITY INFLUENCES COMMUNITY BEHAVIOR

The perception of safety plays a crucial role in shaping citizens' behavior and influencing the social atmosphere within a community. Although the objective reality of safety can be measured through crime rates and reported incidents, how people perceive safety directly affects how they interact, engage, and organize their daily lives. "The perception of safety often differs from objective reality and can be influenced by various factors, including media, social networks, and individual experiences" (*Putnam, 2000*).

In many cases, citizens may perceive a higher level of risk than actually exists due to fear of crime, leading to avoidance behaviors. "Even in communities with low crime rates, the perception of insecurity can lead people to avoid public places, reduce social interactions, and isolate themselves" (*Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997*). This phenomenon reduces social cohesion, leading to a decrease in social capital and increased vulnerability to real risks.

Media and social networks play a key role in shaping perceptions of safety. "Excessive reporting of crime events and alarmist news can amplify fear of

insecurity, even when crime rates are decreasing" (*Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007*). This "indirect media influence can create an exaggerated perception of risks, causing citizens to adjust their behavior and avoid certain places or activities."

A positive perception of safety contributes to increased social capital by encouraging interactions and civic participation. "When people perceive their environment as safe, they are more likely to engage in community activities, connect with neighbors, and attend local events" (*Putnam, 2000*). This involvement enhances social cohesion and builds a sense of trust and responsibility toward the community.

Conversely, a negative perception of safety can lead to social fragmentation and isolation. "Citizens who perceive a high risk of insecurity are less likely to participate in social activities and build neighborhood relationships" (*Coleman, 1988*). This leads to a decline in social capital and a more vulnerable community, as trust bonds are weak and cooperation is reduced.

Public institutions, such as the police and local administrations, play an important role in how citizens perceive their community's safety. "Open and transparent communication from authorities helps reduce anxiety and clarify the true security situation" (*Kapucu, 2006*). For example, providing accurate information about crime rates and safety measures can reduce unfounded fears and increase citizens' trust in security institutions.

Community policing practices, including frequent patrols and interaction with citizens, have shown that they "reduce fear of crime and improve perceptions of safety" (*Sampson et al., 1997*). When citizens see police active and connected to the community, the perception of safety improves, and antisocial behaviors are discouraged.

Studies show that in cities with high social capital, such as many Scandinavian communities, citizens feel a strong sense of safety and actively participate in community life. "High social capital helps create an environment where safety is both perceived and real" (*Aldrich, 2012*). In contrast, in many urban areas with low social capital, citizens have a heightened perception of insecurity, even when crime rates are not necessarily higher. "The fear of insecurity in these communities is fueled by social isolation and lack of cooperation among citizens" (*Putnam, 2000*). These communities tend to experience higher rates of social fragmentation and reduced participation in community activities, making them more vulnerable to real risks.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social capital is a fundamental element in improving public security by influencing citizens' perception of safety and strengthening prevention and emergency management measures. Communities with high social capital—characterized by trust bonds, norms of reciprocity, and a strong social

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF PUBLIC SECURITY

network—demonstrate an increased ability to cooperate effectively, reduce crime, and successfully face crises.

The difference between the perception and reality of public safety highlights the important role of trust and social cohesion. In a community where citizens perceive safety as high, they are more likely to participate in community activities, interact with others, and collaborate with authorities. Conversely, an exaggerated perception of insecurity, amplified by the media or by ineffective communication from authorities, can generate fear, isolation, and a decrease in social cohesion, even in the absence of significant objective risks.

In times of crisis, communities with well-developed social capital demonstrate resilience through rapid mobilization and mutual support. Local social networks, whether online or offline, facilitate information sharing and support the coordination of relief efforts, helping to reduce the impact of crises on community members. This collective mobilization is essential for effectively managing emergencies and reducing community vulnerability.

Thus, investing in social capital by strengthening community ties, supporting civic initiatives, and building trust between citizens and authorities is a crucial strategy for improving public security. By developing united, informed, and cohesive communities, public safety can become not only an objective reality but also a shared sense of security felt by all citizens.

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