For me, the answer has always been through story. Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart. Story offers a wash of images and emotion that returns us to our highest and deepest selves, where we remember what it means to be human, living in place with our neighbors.

– Terry Tempest Williams, from Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert

4. More Police or More People Knowing Their Neighbours? Community Vitality and Social Capital
Social capital is a term used by social scientists (among others) to describe what most of us have in mind when we think of community: the core values, norms, social trust and networks that facilitate coordination and cooperation that is mutually beneficial among members — a moral resource. Social capital can be seen as potential resources that are linked to a strong network of institutionalized relationships. According to researchers Edwards, Franklin and Holland, individuals have access to social capital through their membership to a network or groups, and connections are built up over years and can be transferred from generation to generation. They specify that “the amount of social capital resources available to people depends on the size of their networks, on the extent and quality of the range of capitals possessed by those connections, on expectations of reciprocity being met, and on their status within the group”. But social capital also has to be worked at, rather than merely being constituted in, for example, kinship. Speaking perhaps more clinically, it is “the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term”.

Social capital in and of itself is not a necessary and sufficient condition for community vitality, but rather is interdependent with robust governance. Over the course of this chapter we’ll explore several of the influences on social capital – democracy and trust, economy and education, connectivity, time (specifically all the demands on it) and individual well-being.

Although democracy does not necessarily guarantee high levels of trust and social capital within a society, democracies can promote trust and strong, vibrant communities when people believe they can work together to create fundamental change. A society with strong social capital benefits from people feeling connected and part of their community such that they willingly give their time to it. In crisis, citizens work together to assist one another, individuals trust others and help strangers, and neighbours take care of each other. Social capital is important to both individual and community vitality, allowing people to collectively resolve problems and to mobilize networks for social change and innovation. It also deepens our awareness of our interconnectedness in the process.

Social capital reflects a system of values that has trust deeply embedded within it. Communities that share strong positive values bring people together, creating norms of cooperation, reciprocity and collective identity. This sense of cooperation leads people to become more active members of their community, be helpful and respectful, and to follow moral codes and norms. According to researcher Eric Uslaner, “we need to go beyond our kin and in-groups to trust a wide range of people, especially those whom we don’t know and who are different from us.”
charitable contributions exemplify this dilemma. Voluntary giving helps make a community prosperous by reducing poverty and helping the underprivileged to make a fresh start”.

Another key measure of the quality of social capital in a community is its agency and capacity for resilience.

Agency is the ability of a group to respond to challenges, and this is a critical part of a community’s capacity for resilience – to be able to draw upon their agency and social capital to respond to issues in their community. Agency is also linked to the personal power people feel they have in their lives, and as we discussed in chapter 3, their individual sense of autonomy. Daniel Leighton has identified three elements to human power: the power to shape one’s own life, the power to be resilient in difficult times, and the power to shape the social world. When people feel a true sense of human power and hope for the future, participation in civic society increases, building trust, social bonds, social capital and healthier communities.

Civic participation has fallen over the last twenty years, as has interpersonal trust. Connections have been drawn between North Americans’ withdrawal from civic society and a loss of social capital. Uslaner has identified the widespread increase in television viewing as one cause of this withdrawal. A large portion of society habitually watches television instead of actively participating in the greater community and thinking critically about societal issues. However, Uslaner believes that the true cause underlying is, in fact, a decrease in overall optimistic thinking about the future. Optimism contributes to trust, promotes civic engagement and creates virtuous communities. Thus, hope for the future and having a positive outlook are the building blocks for interpersonal trust and cooperative values. “Optimists believe that other people will be helpful, are tolerant of people from different backgrounds, and value both diversity and independent thinking; they have confidence in their own capacity to shape the world. Optimists are not worried that others will exploit them. If they take a chance and lose, their upbeat worldview leads them to try again. Setbacks are temporary; the next encounter will be more cooperative. So it makes sense to trust others.”

Another key aspect to building and sustaining social capital is access to equitable distribution of resources. Paradoxically, between 1997 and 2008, with an increase in GDP has come an increase in inequality. Research demonstrates a strong correlation between levels of education and economic status, and levels of social capital. Civic participation, including voting, membership in voluntary associations, giving to charity and volunteering, has also decreased over the last twenty-five years in relation to education. Employment is deeply connected to social capital; there is a link between employment and civic participation and volunteering, creating a correlation between employment and institutional trust.
Home ownership and residential stability has also been shown to relate to overall civic participation. And all of these factors are also key determinants of the vitality of a community.

It has been argued that the decline in overall civic engagement in the U.S. has occurred disproportionately between the rich and poor. Researcher Wendy Stone states that:

Social capital is distributed unevenly, that it has become more unequally distributed over time, and that its role may be one of exclusion rather than inclusion. In sum, despite numerous methodological concerns about the way social capital is operationalized in some of the studies reported here, these research findings generally provide support for the relationship between social capital and economic well-being at a macro level described above. There is much to suggest that social capital operates well and is easily facilitated and maintained in areas and circumstances of relative prosperity, but that social capital is hindered by economic disadvantage, poverty and inequality.

Understanding the different dimensions of social capital is also critical when it comes to creating effective social policies. In their work Edwards et al. emphasize this: “the contribution of social capital to reducing inequality and building the capacity of the poor communities will also depend on the relation of community networks to the loci of political power, which can be seen as ‘linking social capital’”. Other research has shown that government policies, unless they are developed strategically at the linking level, that is, bridging and vertical social capital, can actually destroy or inhibit existing social capital in a community.

Issues related to a deficit in social capital tend to dominate the policy agenda in the short term, but we need to understand the variables that impact social capital before creating policies designed to solve social problems. In the end, in order for social capital to thrive and be of benefit to all members of society, deep societal problems related to inequality, education, poverty, unemployment, underemployment and unequal distribution of resources need to be addressed.

Social capital is dependent upon connectivity: people need the space and time to connect to one another, to meet accidentally, to become engaged in conversation. Increased noise pollution, declining natural environments and scenic views, and a decrease in overall time for recreation and volunteering (which we’ll come to in a moment) can all negatively impact social capital. The physical and social environment created by sprawl encourages a sense of isolation, restricts
diversity and generally inhibits people from feeling part of a greater community.\textsuperscript{117} The way we structure our community and its transportation choices determines the nature of the spaces available to us for building and maintaining social capital. A sense of connectivity is also related to a person’s of security and safety in their community. As political scientist Robert Putnam asks: do we need more police officers in our communities, or do we need more people knowing their neighbours?\textsuperscript{118}

Many different factors in modern society have led to an erosion of social capital including, among other things, higher rates of television viewing (as we’ve already discussed), more time on computers and more time in cars.\textsuperscript{119} Between 1969 and 1990, the U.S. population grew only 21\%, however the number of car trips grew by 42\%.\textsuperscript{120} Research conducted by the Sierra Club has shown that sprawl commuters spend three to four times as many hours driving as individuals living in dense, well-planned communities.\textsuperscript{121} Indeed most individuals living in suburbs require access to a car in order to make trips for the most basic amenities and services.\textsuperscript{122} In suburban communities (but in many urban centres too), mass public transit tends to be inaccessible, creating barriers for low-income people, the elderly and the disabled to live without access to a car. Overall, the loss of community created by sprawl is affecting people’s connection with nature and to each other.\textsuperscript{123} A decrease in civic participation is partly a result of individuals having less time due to being caught in a time crunch and spending more time in a vehicle.\textsuperscript{124}

All in all, people are experiencing more time in their cars, with less time devoted to social and cultural activities and in building greater connectivity and social bonds. Long commutes, traffic delays and long work hours leave people exhausted and facing increased demands on their time.

\textbf{In spite of all the time-saving technologies} currently at our disposal, modern-day society seems to have left us less time to engage in civic life and in leisure activities. Laptops, Blackberries, iPhones and email have increased the demand for workers to be continually on call, blurring the boundaries between workplace and home. Society has seen a rise in the percentage of working adults engaged in contract jobs with limited or no employee benefits or job security, increasing time demands and overall stress levels.\textsuperscript{125}

Patterns of time-use are also affected by social and economic opportunity. The 2010 Canadian Index of Wellbeing Report highlights that a higher percentage of women (approximately 20\% more than men) feel caught in a time crunch, and that “Canadians marginalized by race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, gender, sexual orientation and language proficiency, experience systemic barriers to social and economic opportunity. These barriers directly influence their
time – use patterns and indirectly affect their exposure to health risks and participation in health-enhancing activities.” Social capital is consequently impacted when people have limited time for civic participation, or time to build networks and social bonds through social engagements and physical, cultural and social activities.

This time crunch is also having an impact on volunteering, with a notable decrease in volunteering for culture and recreation organizations. In Canada, the total annual number of performances by theatre companies, operas and musical theatre companies decreased from 45,000 to less than 38,000 between 2001 and 2006. A lack of support for the arts not only impacts the vitality of a community by potentially creating financial barriers for artists to continue to devote time to their craft, but also reduces social capital as individuals spend less time participating in social and cultural activities where strong social connections can be cultivated. Access to resources, activities and the outdoors all dramatically impact the quality of life of individuals and the social capital within their communities.

**Although we’ve touched on it elsewhere** in this chapter, let’s look more specifically now at the connections between individual well-being and social capital. Life satisfaction and personal development have been shown to be two fundamental elements of an individual’s overall well-being. A correlation between social capital and well-being can be made, as many of the factors that impact social capital also impact personal well-being, including economic status, education, sense of community and purpose, levels of autonomy, agency and family structure. A set of indicators measuring the well-being of children has been developed by the U.S. government that specifically includes social environment indicators, in addition to population and family characteristics, economic security, health, behaviour and education indicators.

Studies of children and youth have been particularly instructive on the link between well-being and social capital (and we’ll discuss this in more detail in chapter 6). In a pilot study conducted in Nottingham, U.K., by the New Economics Foundation focusing on life satisfaction and personal development, the well-being of children was shown to fall as children got older. Approximately one-third of the young people surveyed were unhappy in daily life and potentially suffered from mental health problems. Well-being appeared to decrease as children got older, with life satisfaction scores falling by 5 to 10% when comparing 9–11-year-olds with 12–15-year-olds. In their report *Spiritual Health and the Well-Being of Urban Young People* Rees et al. note that overall well-being and social capital is lower in unemployed households and separated homes. For example, young people from separated parents have lower personal well-being scores, are less happy about the area in which they live, and are more concerned about crime.
people whose parents are unemployed are more likely to talk to a close friend rather than a parent about issues that are bothering them. Finally, higher rates of mental disorders have been found among young people who live with parents who are both unemployed. These findings suggest that well-being, social bonds and social capital are impacted by family structure, sense of community and family economic status. Clearly, there is a relationship between level of income, employment opportunities, levels of autonomy, connectivity and social capital, though much more extensive research remains to be done.

To sum up, vital communities are created when people know their neighbours, have the time to devote to nurture existing connections and make new ones, often through volunteering, social activities, the arts and, at bottom, through trust in others. Equitable distribution of resources and education positively impacts community vitality and social capital. The modern-day time crunch has been shown to have a strong impact on the amount of time people have to connect with each other and create social bonds, as has the design of our built environment. Personal development and well-being are impacted by economic status, education, sense of community and purpose, and family structure, all of which also influence social capital. In order for a community to be vital and thrive, encouraging the development of social capital and places for it to flourish needs to be made a priority.