

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults

An Action Guide



HEALTHY
PLACES
BY DESIGN





Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults

An Action Guide

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Healthy Places by Design advances community-led action and proven, place-based strategies to ensure health and wellbeing for all. We envision a nation of healthy, equitable communities where everyone reaches their full potential.

To learn more, visit www.healthyplacesbydesign.org

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Glossary

Key terms are **noted in blue** throughout this Action Guide and are defined in the sidebars. Many of the definitions are quoted verbatim from the sources cited for each term. Full definitions and sources are listed in the Appendices.

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About this Action Guide



Overview

The places where people live, learn, and spend time together have a powerful impact on their health and wellbeing. When sidewalks, trails, parks, and other public spaces are thoughtfully designed, they give people safe, comfortable places to walk, bike, roll, and enjoy other kinds of physical activity. Well-designed public spaces also draw people in and make it easier to build relationships that create a sense of community cohesion.

Whenever a community improves infrastructure to support physical activity, there is also a chance to add programs and features that strengthen social connection, such as group activities, events, and gathering areas. This is especially important in neighborhoods that experience higher levels of violence or crime, where fear can keep people indoors and reduce activity.

Strong social ties can make communities safer by helping neighbors look out for one another and feel more comfortable using shared spaces. When public places are both safe and welcoming, people are more likely to use them for exercise and connection. Because of this, preventing violence and creating violence-free community settings is essential for both physical and social health.

Community violence happens in public places, such as streets or parks, between people who may or may not know each other. Examples include assaults, fights among groups, homicides, and fatal and nonfatal shootings.¹ Community violence can cause physical injuries and death for those involved. Living in a community experiencing violence has additional harmful health effects as it is associated with an increased risk of developing chronic diseases.²

Community violence is preventable. If communities are to achieve their shared vision of health and wellbeing for all, violence prevention must go hand in hand with broader community health efforts, such as designing community spaces for physical activity and social connection.

To help community leaders prevent violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed the **Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action** (Prevention Resource). The Prevention Resource focuses on youth and young adults because violence is a leading cause of death for young people in the United States.

Learn more about the **Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action** on page 39.

The Prevention Resource examines community conditions—such as access to employment opportunities that provide livable wages, safe places to gather, and the ability to participate as valued members of communities—and the social and economic factors that raise a community’s risk for violence. It also highlights that some racial and ethnic groups experience far higher rates of community violence, often tied to unequal access to safe housing, jobs, education, and public spaces. The Prevention Resource’s seven strategies and 20 evidence-based approaches to reduce community violence focus on improving the social, economic, and physical conditions of neighborhoods, towns, and public spaces so that people can gather, move, and thrive safely.

A public health practitioner is a person educated in public health or a related discipline who is employed to improve health through a population focus.

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults: An Action Guide (hereafter, Action Guide), adapts policies, programs, and practices from the Prevention Resource to help **public health practitioners**, advocates, researchers, and community members create safer, more equitable spaces where all young people can be physically active and connected. We recommend reading the Prevention Resource as it more closely examines the root causes of community violence and includes additional approaches and strategies not covered in this Action Guide.

Social connection can encompass the interactions, relationships, roles, and sense of connection that individuals, communities, or society may experience. An individual’s level of social connection is influenced by several factors, including the presence and diversity of people in their social network, the functions of their relationships (i.e., if these relationships can provide support), and how their relationships influence their life.

Of the Prevention Resource’s many strategies and approaches, only those that are well aligned with CDC’s efforts to improve safe places for physical activity for youth and families were selected for inclusion. This Action Guide emphasizes the importance of **social connection**. Strong relationships build resilient communities and reduce the risk of violence. Based on this evidence, this Action Guide highlights three recommendations for improving community environments:

1. Improve parks and green spaces to make physical activity safer.
2. Improve public spaces to foster positive social connections.
3. Invest in youth employment to improve community conditions.

The Action Guide also includes Guiding Principles (pages 7-10) and a Taking Action section (pages 27-34) to support practitioners and partners as they put these recommendations into practice. A visual overview (next page) shows how the strategies and sections relate to one another. The aim is to inspire readers to adapt and apply effective practices, together with community members, in ways that fit each community’s unique context, needs, and values.

Safe Spaces for Physical Activity and Social Connection Framework

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Solutions That Solve Many Problems Are Powerful
- Complex Problems Require a Full Range of Partners
- Community Strengths Advance Effective Solutions
- Health Equity Is the North Star

PUBLIC HEALTH TAKING ACTION

- Reframe Violence Prevention as Fundamental to Public Health
- Become a Community Data Resource
- Collaborate Courageously
- Engage Community Members with Lived Expertise

RECOMMENDATION 1

Improve Parks and Green Spaces for Safe Physical Activity

RECOMMENDATION 2

Improve Public Spaces for Safe Social Connection

RECOMMENDATION 3

Invest in Youth Employment to Improve Community Conditions

Limitations and Considerations

Violence prevention involves valuing every person and their health, improving social and economic conditions, and working with different groups to address health issues that affect them. This includes addressing the challenging circumstances that youth may be facing, such as harmful narratives around race and violence.

Active transportation is any self-propelled, human-powered mode of leisure, recreational, or utilitarian transportation. Utilitarian transportation primarily serves practical purposes, such as commuting to work, running errands, or reaching specific destinations.

Learn more about the **Being Black in Public Safety Report** on page 39.

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults: An Action Guide draws on the Prevention Resource and on insights from experts with both professional and lived expertise in community violence, **violence prevention**, and health promotion (see Acknowledgements on page i).

The scope of this Action Guide follows the Prevention Resource definition of community violence: violence that happens in public places, such as streets or parks, between people who may or may not know each other. Examples include assaults, fights among groups, homicides, and fatal and nonfatal shootings.¹ The focus of this Action Guide explores only the direct intersections between evidence-based community violence prevention strategies and approaches that promote physical activity in shared community spaces.

During consultations, experts emphasized that many people affected by or working to address community violence often use broader definitions. For instance, some include traffic-related violence or unsafe conditions that impact people traveling by foot, bike, or transit. The authors of this Action Guide discussed how improving streets for **active transportation** connects to community safety. However, the evidence base for community violence, as defined above, did not directly align with that topic.

Discussions also explored related but distinct issues such as firearm safety, gun violence prevention, policing, and over-policing. These areas are vital to building healthy, safe communities but fall outside the specific scope of this guide. However, several additional resources are provided in the Resources section (pages 39-41) for those interested in these topics, and readers are encouraged to consider them within the broader work of advancing community health, safety, and equity.

Finally, while the full range of safety dimensions (i.e., historical, physical, and psychological) is outside the scope of this Action Guide, it is important to acknowledge common challenges that youth of color have when gathering in public spaces: being harassed, perceived as “causing trouble,” and/or excluded from these spaces. Community members and policy makers need to better understand these experiences to create truly safe, active, and connected public spaces for all. See the Toronto Foundation’s **Being Black in Public Survey Report** for more.

Community violence is preventable. If communities are to achieve their shared vision of health and wellbeing for all, violence prevention must go hand in hand with broader community health efforts, such as designing community spaces for physical activity and social connection.





Guiding Principles

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults: An Action Guide is shaped by the following four guiding principles, which offer a strong foundation for practitioners as they implement strategies to address community violence, physical activity, and social connection.

Solutions That Solve Many Problems Are Powerful

Multi-solving—a concept from Elizabeth Sawin, co-director of **Climate Interactive**—is about combining expertise, funding, and political will to solve multiple problems with one strategy or shared investment. This approach makes the best use of limited community resources including time, money, space, attention, and energy. As this Action Guide shows effective ways to prevent violence, boost physical activity, and strengthen social connections, it fully embraces multi-solving to create bigger impact with every effort.

Learn more about **Climate Interactive** on page 39.

Complex Problems Require a Full Range of Partners

Addressing violence prevention, physical activity, and social connection in community settings requires bringing together partners from many sectors who intentionally engage community members, especially young people facing community violence, as full partners in the process. Collaboration sparks more innovative solutions by blending diverse viewpoints, lived expertise, and unique community priorities from planning through implementation. When strategies fit community needs, they are more likely to be sustained and impactful.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Government leaders (e.g., planning, transportation, public works, elected officials, and parks and recreation).
- Community members with lived expertise in community violence, especially youth and young adults, people with disabilities, and people who are more likely to face barriers to safe physical activity.
- Community-based organizations representing or supporting key populations such as youth and issues like housing and crime prevention.
- Others: Community employers (e.g., healthcare systems and private employers), school districts, healthcare, arts and culture, Cooperative Extension Agencies, and neighborhood associations.

Community Strengths Advance Effective Solutions

Asset-Based Community

Development is an approach to working with communities that begins by recognizing the assets of the community and shows how organizing to mobilize those positive aspects is key to asserting power and agency to bring about change.

Every community has assets including people, places, policies, and more. Community members know these strengths best and can point to what's already working well. Their understanding is crucial for shaping policy, systems, or environmental changes that best create fairer access to safe places for physical activity for everyone in the community. Therefore, this Action Guide embraces **Asset-Based Community Development** (ABCD) which centers community members and community-based organizations as the drivers of change, rather than passive recipients of help. Public health practitioners are more effective when they use language that celebrates what communities do well, rather than dwelling on deficits.

Health Equity Is the North Star

Health Equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health. Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities and injustices, and the elimination of health and healthcare disparities.

Learn more about the **Community Conditions Can Impact Risk of Violence** section of the Prevention Resource on page 39.

Health equity means everyone has a fair chance to be as healthy as possible. Achieving it requires directly addressing the barriers that hold people back—such as poverty, systemic racism, and unequal access to care. The existence and quality of neighborhood spaces—parks, sidewalks, bus stops, and other public areas—plays a major role in health. These places determine whether people can safely walk, bike, play, or exercise in their communities as well as form positive connections with others in these spaces. But access to safe, welcoming spaces varies widely between and within communities, often due to historic policies and practices that have led to chronic disinvestments. (See the **Community Conditions Can Impact Risk of Violence** section of the Prevention Resource.) That's why prioritizing health equity is essential.

“In the small towns where I grew up, finding a safe place that felt like ours was rare. We often had to go far to connect and be ourselves, and not everyone had a car to get there. For me, having a space nearby where we can gather, speak Spanish, and just feel at home would change everything. It’s more than just a park or a building—it’s about having a place that truly feels like ours, where we have a voice in how it grows, and where we can move around safely without needing a car to make it happen.”

Jason Gonzalez

Young adult with lived experience





Recommendations for Improving Community Environments

RECOMMENDATION 1

**Improve Parks and Green Spaces
for Safe Physical Activity**

RECOMMENDATION 2

**Improve Public Spaces
for Safe Social Connection**

RECOMMENDATION 3

**Invest in Youth Employment to
Improve Community Conditions**

Why It Matters

Public **green spaces** such as parks, greened vacant lots, gardens, greenways, and trails, are an influential factor in how physically active and socially connected people are in their communities. When these spaces are easy to reach, designed with health and safety in mind, and feel welcoming, people are more likely to use them. Likewise, people see public places as safer when they observe others using them for healthy behaviors including walking, bicycling, rolling, or playing. Having social support—such as a walking buddy or others providing encouragement—also increases the likelihood that a person will be more physically active, and it strengthens social connection.³

Strong social connections do more than make people feel supported; they also help prevent crime and build safer neighborhoods, especially for youth and young adults.⁴ Research shows that communities with higher levels of social connection experience less violence and better health outcomes. As former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy notes, when people feel connected, communities become healthier, more resilient, and less violent.⁵ The CDC also emphasizes that when adults and communities create safe, stable, and caring environments, young people thrive physically, mentally, and socially—laying the foundation for healthier, safer futures.⁶

Community spaces can be intentionally designed and activated through programs and events in ways that prevent community violence and support physical activity and social connection. Evidence shows that modifying both the physical and social environments of a community can create **protective environments** that reduce community violence and increase opportunities for safe physical activity. Investing in and involving those who face the greatest barriers to community safety are essential strategies for increasing health and equity. Employing youth and young adults to help shape and care for community spaces builds leadership opportunities and strengthens safety and belonging for everyone.

Green spaces typically refer to land with natural vegetation, including grass, trees, and other plants, that is open and accessible to the public.

Protective environments are physical spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, towns, cities, youth-serving organizations or institutions, and areas (e.g., streets, parks, and public transportation hubs) where individuals regularly interact. These spaces can create a sense of safety, inclusion, and belonging.

Cross-Cutting Barriers and Solutions

EQUITABLE INVESTMENT

Access to safe, well-maintained parks and reliable transportation often reflects a long history of inequitable investments and policies—especially in neighborhoods with more Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, as well as people with low incomes. These inequities have left many areas with fewer parks, lower-quality green spaces, and poorly maintained public spaces that feel unsafe. This erodes trust, discourages activity, and can increase violence. To change this, communities need sustained, equitable investment in youth jobs and in building, renovating, and maintaining parks and green spaces—including funding not just for new projects, but also for routine upkeep such as mowing, litter removal, equipment repairs, adding lights, and removing obstructions so spaces remain inviting and secure. Equitable maintenance must be built into community budgets; expecting homeowners to maintain sidewalks is both inequitable and ineffective. Maintenance budgets can also support seasonal youth employment, keeping spaces clean while providing young people with job experience, physical activity, and income.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Innovative budgeting practices can also promote equity. One promising tool is participatory budgeting, a democratic process that gives community members real power to decide how public money is spent. This approach puts resources where they're needed most, deepens civic engagement, and builds trust between community members and decision-makers.⁷ Other steps include making funding easier for small, community-led groups—especially those run by or for marginalized communities—through training, simpler applications, and hands-on support to help them secure grants and drive real, lasting change.

LIGHTING

Good lighting in public spaces makes roads safer and helps prevent violence. Bright lights at intersections protect drivers, walkers, and cyclists, while lighting in parks, parking lots, and sidewalks reduces crime.⁸ In parks, people feel safer when they can clearly see their surroundings, and lighting is key for safe outdoor exercise, especially during seasons with short daylight hours. Well-lit public spaces can also help people feel more comfortable lingering and interacting with others, enhancing social connection and a sense of belonging.

Improve Parks and Green Spaces for Safe Physical Activity

Parks and green spaces are essential to healthy communities. They give people places to be active, connect with nature, and spend time with others—all of which support physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Parks also strengthen local economies, reduce pollution, improve air and water quality, and help lower rates of violence and crime.^{9,10,11} With so many benefits, it's no wonder that communities and people of all ages across the U.S. strongly support investments in parks.

Safe parks and recreation facilities encourage people to interact, build trust, and look out for one another. However, not everyone has the same access to these spaces. Historical and ongoing inequities resulting from policies such as redlining, segregation, and exclusionary zoning have led to significant disparities in access to resources.¹² Furthermore, violence and violent injury are more common in places that were historically redlined, further exacerbating the impacts from these policies.¹³ Addressing these inequities requires intentional planning, sustained investment, and decision-making that elevates neighborhoods that have been left behind.

DESIGN FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

Designing and managing parks with equity in mind means considering the needs of everyone. This includes ensuring that people with disabilities can access and enjoy all park features, and that programs and spaces reflect diverse cultural and community needs. When designing or revitalizing parks and green spaces, it's critical to meaningfully involve those who are most affected by community violence, especially people who feel unsafe or excluded from these spaces. Their perspectives help ensure that new investments create parks that are welcoming, inclusive, and beneficial for all. Women and girls, for example, often report feeling unsafe or unwelcome in parks due to harassment or a lack of input in design decisions.^{14,15} Engaging them directly in the planning process—and including practical features such as better lighting, lower hedges, and multiple exit routes—can make parks feel safer and more inclusive for everyone. **Plan4Health** has many resources for developers, design professionals, and advocates.

Learn more about **Plan4Health** on page 39.

Making parks accessible also depends on how easy they are to reach. Work with community members, transportation departments, and active transportation advocates to ensure that parks are connected to safe walking, rolling, and transit routes. Policies that require developers to set aside land for public green space in new construction or redevelopment projects can further increase access to nearby public spaces for physical activity.

IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT HEALTH AND SAFETY

Learn more about **Safe Routes to School** and **Chicago Safe Passage** at www.saferoutespartnership.org and www.cps.edu/services-and-supports/student-safety-and-security/safe-passage-program/.

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations to address issues affecting the wellbeing of those people.

Programs that encourage walking or biking in groups help people feel safer and more supported while being active in public spaces. These efforts create safety in numbers, build relationships among neighbors, and make it easier for people—especially youth—to be active as part of their daily routines. **Safe Routes to School** is one example of this kind of program. It helps students walk or roll to and from school safely by improving routes, adding safety features, and organizing group activities such as walking school buses and bike trains. These initiatives work well in many types of communities, from rural to urban, and use a mix of infrastructure changes, education, and **community engagement** to support active school travel and strengthen a sense of community.

Safe Routes to School programs can also help prevent community violence and increase physical activity among students by putting more eyes on the street and creating trusted routines and relationships. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership offers tools and guidance to address safety concerns, including violence and harassment, on school routes. Some communities also hire local community members as safe passage workers. They are trained to de-escalate conflict, look out for students, and report potential threats; **Chicago Safe Passage** is one example. By addressing safety, social connection, and physical activity at the same time, Safe Routes to School and related safe passage efforts are powerful multi-solver strategies. They help reduce the risk of violence, connect young people with caring adults, and give students more chances to be active and engaged in their communities each day.

BURLINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

In 2018, the Morrowtown Community Group formed in response to community violence affecting Burlington’s Morrowtown neighborhood. Mothers who had lost sons to violence joined community members and local organizations as a task force to end the cycle of violence and revitalize Morrowtown. Partnering with officials, funders, a nearby university, and local agencies, they improved lighting, paved streets, installed fire hydrants, strengthened rental maintenance standards, and developed a community garden and playground. The collaboration also established the Burlington Community Land Trust, social connection opportunities among churches, and youth events such as “Mondays in Morrowtown.”

Morrowtown Community Group:
www.morrowtown.org and
 minutes 10:11–12:17 of www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJOeTeGxX8

PUEBLO, COLORADO

In 2016, the Pueblo Communities that Care Coalition, which was initially formed to address youth substance use, held focus groups with dozens of young people to learn about their favorite destinations and gathering places. Youth cited expensive and cumbersome transportation as a major barrier. After securing additional funding, the coalition partnered with Pueblo Transit to provide free transit for K–12 students using school IDs, increasing ridership by 32 percent. The coalition then launched the youth-only Southern Colorado Youth Go app, a platform that improves accessibility, affordability, and connectivity for young people in Pueblo County as they participate in positive, healthy activities.

Pueblo Communities that Care Coalition: <https://county.pueblo.org/public-health-department/communities-care>
 Southern Colorado Youth Go: socoyogo.com

WYANDOTTE COUNTY, KANSAS

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) empowers people to assess conditions that impact community safety—such as streetlights, sidewalks, and litter—and improve them. In 2018, partners of the Wyandotte County Community Health Improvement Plan attended CPTED training in Kansas City and walked through tunnels on the Jersey Creek Trail, a site local youth considered unsafe. Afterward, BikeWalk KC, the Metropolitan Organization Countering Sexual Assault (MOCSA), New Bethel Church, Wyandotte County Public Health Department, and other partners secured grant funding for lighting and other improvements to create safer environments for physical activity. Kansas City high school students are also using the Community by Design: Neighborhood Safety Toolkit—developed by MOCSA’s Prevention Department and the WyCo Violence Prevention Coalition—to assess and improve safety on their campuses.

CPTED: <https://thenicp.com/about-us/>
 Wyandotte County Community Health Improvement Plan: www.wycokck.org/Departments/Health/Community-Health/Community-Health-Improvement-Plan
 Jersey Creek Trail: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oemvmpM600w
 MOCSA: www.mocsa.org/prevention/
 Community by Design: Neighborhood Safety Toolkit: www.mocsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Kansas-CPTED-Toolkit-Final-version-2024-1.pdf

RECOMMENDATION 2

Improve Public Spaces for Safe Social Connection

Promoting social connection in public spaces is an effective way to support community safety and physical activity. Well-designed social spaces—including plazas, shaded seating areas, community courtyards, and transformed vacant lots—as well as policies that make it easier for people to host events or gather informally, all help build stronger relationships. These connections create a shared sense of responsibility for keeping the community safe and healthy.

DESIGN THIRD PLACES TO SUPPORT HEALTH AND SAFETY

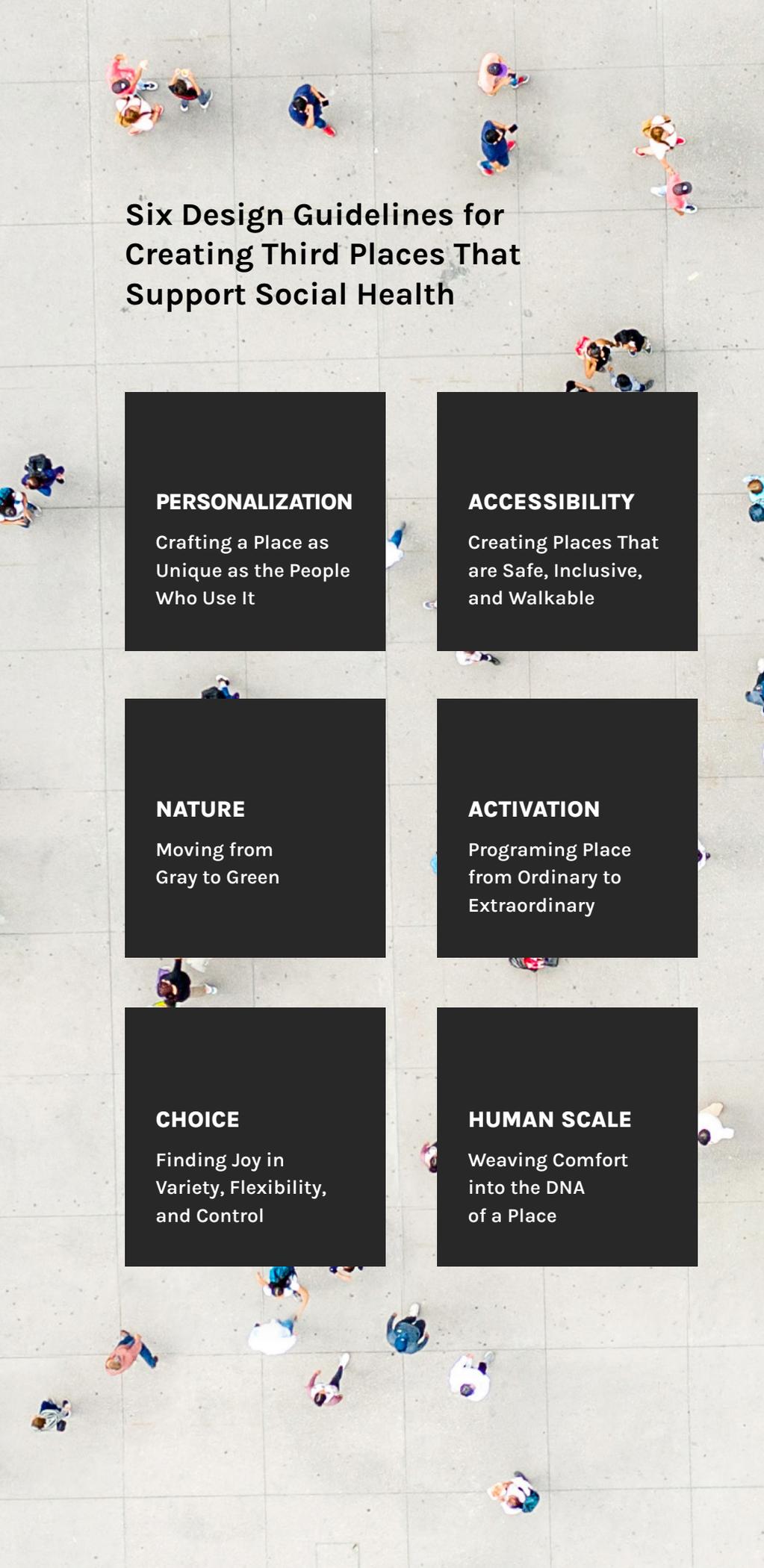
Third places can be designed to support health, safety, and connection. These are the everyday places where people can easily talk, see neighbors, and spend unstructured time together, which builds trust, reduces isolation, and can help prevent crime.¹⁶ Third places look different in every community. They can be libraries, community centers, parks, or playgrounds, and even streets that are temporarily closed to cars so that people can walk, bike, play, and socialize during Open Street or **Play Street** events. These kinds of spaces give people of all ages safe, free places to be active and connect with others. Local governments can support Open and Play Streets through funding and providing access to permits for street closures and events.

Parks and green spaces are even more valuable when they are intentionally designed as third places. Features such as comfortable seating, gathering and play areas, and multi-generational programming can deepen relationships and make parks feel like true community hubs. Evidence-based design strategies,¹⁷ such as the PANACHe elements (Figure 1), can help turn streets, green spaces, and parks into strong social spaces by focusing on:

- A clear sense of place through personalization
- Easy accessibility
- Contact with nature, which is also shown to improve health
- Activation through programming
- Choices in how people can use the space
- **Human-scale design** that feels comfortable and inviting

Play Streets are a type of Open Streets focused on children playing outdoors. Play Streets involve temporarily closing streets to motorists to create a safe place for active play, often providing play equipment, supervision, and food to those who attend.

Human-scale design uses architectural detailing and variety to create small and intimate environments that are comfortable for people to move through or occupy. These spaces meet basic human needs for comfort and safety, and are shown to promote more social interactions and lingering.



Six Design Guidelines for Creating Third Places That Support Social Health

PERSONALIZATION

Crafting a Place as Unique as the People Who Use It

ACCESSIBILITY

Creating Places That are Safe, Inclusive, and Walkable

NATURE

Moving from Gray to Green

ACTIVATION

Programing Place from Ordinary to Extraordinary

CHOICE

Finding Joy in Variety, Flexibility, and Control

HUMAN SCALE

Weaving Comfort into the DNA of a Place

These PANACHe elements tap into core needs for social connection: feeling safe, being near others, and having real chances to interact. They can be applied at scales ranging from small indoor spaces to entire blocks. For third places to truly work, people must also be able to reach them safely and conveniently—ideally within walking distance of home, work, or school.

Figure 1 content from [Connecting IRL: How the Built Environment Can Foster Social Health](#), E. Peavey, 2020, HKS Inc. Learn more about the Design Guidelines on page 40.

Pocket parks are public park spaces that occupy less than one acre of land and are built with the intention of providing the community in the park's immediate vicinity with the benefits of a public park. Pocket parks use scaled-down features and recreational amenities to relay the same benefits afforded by larger parks while occupying a fraction of the space.

Placekeeping is the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there. It is not just preserving buildings, but also keeping the cultural memories associated with a locale alive, while supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose.

REMEDiate VACANT LOTS

Community violence can be reduced when vacant lots are cared for and transformed into welcoming places. Turning empty, overgrown spaces into vibrant areas invites people to gather, be active, and connect with their neighbors, which helps build a stronger sense of safety and community. Vacant lots can be repurposed in many ways, such as **pocket parks**, butterfly gardens, or community food gardens. Community clean up days offer chances for people of different ages to work side by side, build relationships, and take pride in their neighborhood. The Prevention Resource notes that community-led cleaning activities in green spaces resulted in significantly greater declines in violent crime compared to those that were professionally mowed.¹⁸

Working together to reimagine vacant lots, alleys, or parks into places for play, learning, and gathering can deepen a sense of belonging and reduce violence. Creative **placekeeping** can be a strong approach to reimagine vacant lots. It brings community members together to honor local culture and history while reshaping spaces so that people want to spend time there. Public art such as murals, sculptures, and culturally meaningful designs can brighten a vacant lot, showcase local artists, and tell the stories of the people who live there. Placekeeping works best when local artists, culture keepers, community organizations, and community members of all ages codesign the space. Even temporary features like popup play areas, seating, or art installations can activate underused spaces and spark new ideas for long term use. Policies that make it easier to get permits and fund local art help recognize and support artists' time, skill, and leadership. Youth and young adults are key partners in this work, and they can be hired and trained as part of placekeeping programs.

In some cases, communities can also address long-neglected properties through policies that clarify who is accountable for the lot and what happens when lots are neglected. For example, when lots with abandoned homes or commercial buildings are poorly maintained, local governments may fine property owners. If fines go unpaid, the city can place a lien on the property and eventually sell it with the aim of improvement.

Placekeeping

Placekeeping is a term intentionally used instead of placemaking. According to the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, while many placemaking activities result in positive change, “some placemaking activities can also support gentrification, racism, real estate speculation, all in the name of ‘neighborhood revitalization.’”

The term placekeeping emphasizes the importance of active engagement by those who live and work in that place and of “keeping the cultural memories associated with a locale alive, while supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose.”



PROMOTE POLICIES THAT STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTION

Policies at every level—local, state, regional, and federal—shape daily life in communities and are important tools for improving health, building social connection, and preventing community violence. They set priorities, signal what a community values, guide how organizations act, and determine where funding and other resources go.

For example, to support safe, active, and connected communities, local governments can offer free or low-cost permits for block parties and allow community members to temporarily close streets so neighbors can gather, play, and be active together. Simplifying and lowering the barriers to reserving park space for community events can encourage more use of public spaces. Policies can also support more third places or community spaces, such as libraries, community centers, and small plazas, by creating specific zoning categories that make it easier to develop and protect them.

When more gathering places exist in neighborhoods, people have more chances to bump into each other, talk, and build relationships. Because the factors that strengthen or weaken social connection cut across many sectors—including housing, transportation, education, labor, and more—there are endless opportunities to strengthen social connection through policy. The former U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, recommends a “Connection-in-All-Policies” approach, which recognizes that decisions in any sector can either support or undermine social connection, and that governments have a responsibility to reduce the harms caused by policies or practices that drive people apart.¹⁹

BRONX, NEW YORK

As part of the Bronx Health REACH coalition’s work, two dozen young people from the South Bronx helped paint beautiful murals at New York City Housing Authority developments in the Mott Haven neighborhood. Casita Maria, a center for arts and recreation in the South Bronx and Bronx Health REACH partner, organized youth to create four outdoor murals to help activate and celebrate these public spaces. A once-closed playground near Betances Houses had been known for gang and drug activity but is now open again and viewed as a safe, neutral space open to all in the community. Each mural incorporates iconic images from a renowned Bronx photographer and inspires community members to stay active and healthy.

Casita Maria:
www.casitamaria.org/creative-arts/murals-page/

GENESEE COUNTY, MICHIGAN

Careful, community-led maintenance of vacant and repurposed land is critical, and community leaders who do this effectively go beyond simply reclaiming vacant lots. Clean & Green, launched in 2004 by the Genesee County Land Bank, builds community capacity, supports neighborhood health and youth engagement, promotes vacant land reuse, and strengthens community relationships. About 100 community-based groups—including block clubs, schools, churches, neighborhood associations, and nonprofits—maintain vacant properties, receiving stipends which are often used to hire local youth to improve neighborhood conditions.

Clean and Green:
www.thelandbank.org/cleanandgreen.asp

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

Sowing Seeds of Change (SSC) is a nonprofit organization providing vocational education and paid internships for youth with disabilities and those leaving the foster care system. In 2021, the City of Long Beach leased a 14,000 square foot vacant parcel for an urban garden after a draft site plan and renderings were provided by a PlacemakingUS-sponsored design effort. In collaboration with the Long Beach Unified School District and other partners, SSC trains transitional young adults to participate in the local food system and prepares them for their own micro enterprises. Next to the garden, the city is realigning Shoreline Drive, a \$60 million urban retrofit project that is adjacent to the Drake/Cesar Chavez Greenbelt Park development. The Shoreline Drive project will reconfigure freeway access ramps that burden the area with car exhaust, impermeability, and an unwalkable landscape in a historically divided neighborhood facing economic and social inequities.

Sowing Seeds of Change:
www.sowingseedsofchange.org
 SSC urban garden:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLUr350qdTk
 Shoreline Drive project:
<https://lbpost.com/news/30m-grant-will-help-fund-dramatic-shoreline-drive-overhaul/>
 Drake/Cesar Chavez Greenbelt Park:
www.pressetelegram.com/2010/08/26/drake-chavez-park-connection-funded/

Invest in Youth Employment to Improve Community Conditions

Expanding youth employment supports efforts to create safe places for youth to be active and connected, can prevent community violence, and is an investment in their futures. Youth jobs and training programs can reduce young people's exposure to violence, lower overall violence, build important life and work skills, connect youth with caring adults, and provide income for families. Research also shows that fair hiring practices and strong, trusting relationships with adult mentors are especially important for young people's success. The need is especially notable for Black, Latinx, and other marginalized youth who often face discrimination and lower wages compared with their White peers.²⁰

Many sectors can create employment opportunities for young people, including government agencies, nonprofits, community coalitions, schools, and businesses. Public health practitioners can help bring partners together, identify gaps, and expand high-quality positions. Local governments and departments such as public health and parks and recreation can provide paid jobs and skill-building experiences in areas like violence prevention, health promotion, and community outreach. In the short term, this gives youth meaningful ways to contribute; over time, it can open doors to public health careers, especially for people of color who are underrepresented in the public health and related fields, and help spread health and safety messages peer-to-peer.

A **positive youth development approach** is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.

Youth contributions do not have to be limited to traditional jobs. Young people can be paid for their time on advisory councils, youth boards, and coalitions—for example, mayors' youth councils that help plan summer events or guide city decisions affecting them and their peers. Compensating young people for this leadership builds civic skills, strengthens relationships with adults, and signals that their ideas are valued. Whether employing youth or engaging them as advisors, it is critical to treat them as true partners, not tokens. A **positive youth development approach** centers their strengths, supports skill-building, recognizes their contributions, and nurtures authentic, caring relationships with adults—all key protective factors against community violence. Ensuring that youth are paid a living wage also supports equity by improving financial stability and increasing the likelihood of positive future education and employment outcomes.

“Improve the transportation that we already have. Sometimes the bus doesn’t show up because they don’t have enough drivers—a lot of times I get stuck somewhere, and I don’t know how to get back home because the bus didn’t show up. Improve transportation, because that’s essential for participating in summer programs and activities.”

Juliana Vargas Farias

Young adult with lived experience



To fully support youth employment and expand youth employment programs, safe, convenient, and affordable transportation options are needed. Many young people—especially Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized youth—do not have a driver’s license, cannot or do not want to drive, may have limited or no access to a car, may be disabled, or may not be able to use rideshare services. Addressing these barriers is essential to ensure that all young people can benefit from employment opportunities.

Complete Streets is an approach to planning, designing, and building streets that enables safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders.

Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all.

Solutions include improving streets for safe walking, biking, and rolling; offering free or low-cost scooters or bicycles with safety education; expanding and increasing the frequency of bus routes; providing discounted or prorated transit passes; and connecting youth with safe, affordable ride options. Transportation policies that support healthy community design and access to jobs, health care, and social interaction, such as **Complete Streets** and **Vision Zero** plans, along with Safe Routes policies, can help ensure that young people have safe, reliable ways to travel to work, school, and community programs.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Research shows that economic conditions in communities can have a significant influence on community violence. Income inequality within a neighborhood is associated with higher rates of violence, and “neighborhoods with higher poverty and unemployment rates (often due to systemic disinvestment and abandonment by public and private sectors) have higher rates of violent crime.”²¹ These conditions also limit job opportunities for youth.²² Effective strategies for youth employment must bridge these challenges, ensuring that youth and young adults of color and those in lower-income communities have critical supports, such as transportation. Conversely, household financial security and economic opportunities act as buffers against violence. Therefore, although economic revitalization is beyond this Action Guide’s scope, it remains essential in rural and urban areas affected by historic disinvestment or limited employment opportunity.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

In 2015, the City of Detroit consolidated its disparate summer youth employment programs into Grow Detroit's Young Talent (GDYT). GDYT is managed by Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation, in partnership with Connect Detroit and other community partners. This centralized program has expanded possibilities for smaller nonprofit and neighborhood organizations to employ young people who, in turn, gain real world experience in many different sectors, including green infrastructure and landscaping. It is critical that cities train workers to address climate change and to help staff the green economy. Many for-profit outdoor companies have difficulty hiring workers. Detroit has responded by expanding summer youth employment to train and prepare young people for the workforce.

Grow Detroit's Young Talent:
<https://gdyt.org>

PORTLAND, OREGON

At Dawson Park, a culturally significant two-acre haven in the heart of North Portland's Eliot neighborhood, ACHIEVE Coalition partners organized the "Reclaiming Black Joy" celebrations. The impetus for this meaningful social connection event was a community member's plea to the Multnomah County REACH Program to help them not lose the park to violence; the park had previously been the site of multiple homicides from six shootings in six months. The REACH Program, in partnership with its ACHIEVE Coalition and community partners, brings together social service, government, and nonprofits to distribute resources and services such as pop-up vaccine clinics, energy assistance, insurance enrollment, free culturally diverse books from the library, music, and food. Portland youth are paid to help with setup, staff support, and cleanup after this neighborhood event. While the events center the Black community, the space is free and open to all in an otherwise diverse location of the county, with Latinos, Cantonese, and many other ethnicities coming together. While centering Black culture and welcoming diverse participation, "Reclaiming Black Joy" demonstrates the power of community-led initiatives in engaging youth, fostering social connection, and preventing violence. This model highlights the importance of local government support in nurturing such efforts, which contribute to a safer, more inclusive community.

Reclaiming Black Joy:
<https://multco.us/news/reclaiming-spaces-and-reclaiming-black-joy>
ACHIEVE coalition:
<https://multco.us/info/achieve>



Taking Action: Advice for Public Health Practitioners

Public health practitioners and other experts with experience organizing community violence prevention programs offered the following suggestions for peers who are seeking to play a greater role in advancing community safety.

Reframe Violence Prevention as Fundamental to Public Health

Community safety is closely connected to many public health priorities, including chronic disease and injury prevention, mental health, and healthy environments. Improving park lighting, for example, does more than support physical activity. It can also make people feel safer and deter violence. When practitioners explain these kinds of links, it becomes easier to align efforts, build partnerships, and make the case for shared investments.

Engaging youth and community members, especially those with lived expertise, provides valuable insights into how these issues overlap in their everyday lives. Their stories show how health, safety, housing, transportation, and neighborhood conditions intersect and compound in daily life, even when programs are funded and managed separately. Centering these voices helps ensure that strategies are relevant, respectful, and grounded in real community priorities.

Public health departments and their partner organizations can make community violence prevention a core part of their mission. This means weaving safety into policy work, funding decisions, program design, and data and evaluation—while making sure people most affected by community violence help lead and shape solutions to it. Taking this broad, integrated approach strengthens community trust and supports long-term health and safety for everyone.

Become a Community Data Resource

Community assessment, program evaluation, and tracking disease and injury are core parts of public health. However, this information is often inaccessible to community members. Long reports, technical language, and hard-to-find databases can make the information feel distant, confusing, or irrelevant to everyday life in a community.

Public health practitioners can change this by using data not only to design programs, but also to help people tell their stories and shape solutions. Community members should be involved from the beginning in deciding what questions to ask and what data to collect so that the information reflects their priorities and lived expertise. This helps move from a “being researched” feeling to a partnership where community members are co-creators, not just subjects.

Researchers and practitioners can draw on existing data, or collect new information, to better understand safety concerns that matter to community members. Breaking down data by age, gender, race and ethnicity, and other factors makes it possible to see where inequities exist, focus more on reducing those inequities, and strengthen health and wellbeing across the community. Looking at what causes community violence can also help show which indicators to pay attention to and measure.

Engaging youth and other community members directly in collecting and interpreting information makes data more meaningful and useful. Numbers such as crime or injury statistics can be paired with stories, observations, and local perspectives to create a fuller picture of what is happening and why. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data helps identify both problems and solutions more clearly.

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that has participants use photography, and stories about their photos, to identify and represent issues of importance to them, which enables researchers to have a greater understanding of the issue under study.

Methods such as **Photovoice**, storytelling, and oral history are effective tools for this kind of work. In Photovoice projects, community members use photos and captions to show what helps or harms safety and health in their neighborhoods, then discuss what change is needed. Storytelling and oral history efforts invite people to share their experiences in their own words, preserving community memory and surfacing ideas for action. Bringing these approaches into public health practice humanizes statistics and strengthens the connection between data and daily life. When community voices and lived expertise guide how information is collected, interpreted, and used, public health efforts are more likely to reflect real conditions—and to drive meaningful, lasting change.

“If you’re collecting the data, give it to the community. The community needs to know how you plan on using the data collected. If you’re going to apply for funding, they need to know what funding you’re applying for and how it will be used. My plea to public health professionals is to come to the community—be transparent, be compassionate, listen to people. Find out the community needs and go from there. If you’re not bringing your data to the community then we’ll still be in the same place where we are 10 years from now.”

Jackie Hawkins
Action Guide advisor
Delta Community Solutions



Collaborate Courageously

Big, complicated problems such as community violence need many people working together. Preventing violence is not something one group can do alone—it takes youth and adults, neighborhood leaders, community organizations, faith groups, local government, elected officials, businesses, and funders all pulling in the same direction. Public health practitioners can be strong partners in this work. They can help with community outreach and engagement, bring together diverse partners, share useful data to understand what is happening and whether efforts are working, and explain why prioritizing equity is essential for lasting safety and health. When building partnerships, it also helps to think about people and groups who are not typically involved in violence prevention, such as Cooperative Extension educators, workforce development programs, and academic institutions. They can bring fresh perspectives, skills, and resources that strengthen community safety efforts.

Engage Community Members with Lived Expertise

Public health practitioners and their partners bring important skills and knowledge, but they often do not share the day-to-day experiences of people living with unsafe conditions or community violence. To create meaningful and effective solutions, it is essential to involve—and fairly compensate—the young people and adults who live in the neighborhoods most affected. Community members should be partners in every stage of this work, not just people who are consulted at the end. This can include helping assess neighborhood conditions, collecting and interpreting data, joining listening sessions, setting priorities, brainstorming solutions, creating action plans, doing outreach, implementing strategies, and evaluating progress. When sharing information or resources, present them in ways that respect people's expertise and support their ability to lead change in their own communities.

“Part of [a greater public health role] is helping people recognize that they’re already doing violence prevention; they just may not give that label to it. Celebrating culture, addressing people by their preferred pronouns, dismantling racism, food pantries, access to health insurance, and living wage jobs are violence prevention strategies. Being a trusted adult is violence prevention. Making sure people can access everyday destinations safely is violence prevention. Making sure that people feel seen and heard is violence prevention. You’re likely already doing it—part of it is creating common language and realizing the intersectionality of the challenges and solutions.”

Charlene McGee

Action Guide advisor

Multnomah County Health Department



Before engaging youth and other community members, take time to learn about the community's cultures, histories, and context. A few ways to start include:

- Talking with local library staff, community health workers, and others who reach out to and work closely with people of all ages and backgrounds and are tuned into community needs. Ask them to recommend other organizations and individuals who have contextual information.
- Partnering with grassroots and nonprofit groups, such as block clubs, neighborhood associations, parent groups, and faith communities that already have strong relationships and credibility. They can help design outreach that feels safe and welcoming and may co-host conversations with public health staff.
- Observing local government meetings (e.g., city council or parks and transportation committees), which are often recorded or streamed, to understand current issues, community concerns, and key decision-makers.
- Attending public cultural events to better understand local traditions and networks, while being mindful not to show up in ways that feel intrusive or performative, especially where trust in government is low.

When meeting with community members, focus on being a respectful listener. Ask open questions, listen without defensiveness, and let community members define issues in their own words. Make it as easy as possible for people to participate by holding meetings in familiar locations, at convenient times, and by offering childcare, transportation support, and food. Use clear, transparent processes for decision-making, and consider tools such as participatory budgeting so that community members can directly shape how resources are used.

Finally, a responsive approach means learning from community members, co-creating solutions, and following their lead. Events, programs, and environmental approaches that recognize and celebrate culture within neighborhoods are more likely to be appreciated, supported, and sustained.

Language Justice in Community Engagement

Language is a primary tool for people to connect with each other and share their stories, ideas, and experiences, and people need to receive information and participate using their own languages and dialects. A lack of language interpreters means some community members may not be able to engage. Language justice incorporates practices that enable everyone to communicate in the language they prefer and ensures that the language used is culturally relevant and resonates with diverse community members. This approach is more likely to yield solutions that improve equity, since it enables people who are typically among the most marginalized to be included in processes and decision-making. Multilingual spaces better help people communicate, learn, and strategize together.

Ensuring language justice requires ongoing planning and commitment, including a pool of paid, skilled, and reliable interpreters and translators who are ideally locally based. Consider providing multilingual capacity building and language justice training to public health staff and partners to improve outreach and community engagement efforts. Learn more by exploring the Communities Creating Healthy Environments (CCHHE)'s **Language Justice Toolkit**. Finally, take care not to use terms and concepts that stigmatize youth and young adults, especially for those who have been exposed to violence. For more on this, see “Language Choices” on page 15 of the Prevention Resource.

Learn more about the CCHHE **Language Justice Toolkit** on page 41.



Conclusion and Appendices

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults: An Action Guide is an invitation to imagine—and build—communities where every young person can move freely, feel safe, and know they belong. It offers practical ideas, real-world examples, and tools you can adapt to your own local context to prevent violence while expanding opportunities for physical activity and social connection.

No single person, program, or department can do this work alone. Progress happens when youth and adults, community organizations, public agencies, and other partners work side by side, centering the voices and leadership of those most affected by investment disparities and community violence. When communities invest in safe public spaces, meaningful youth employment, and strong relationships, they are investing in healthier futures for everyone.

This Action Guide is meant to grow and improve over time. Your experiences, lessons, and ideas are essential to that process. As you test, adapt, and build on the strategies in these pages, please share what you learn with us at hello@healthypacesbydesign.org to inform future efforts and help build the field.

Glossary

Active Transportation is any self-propelled, human-powered mode of leisure, recreational, or utilitarian transportation. Utilitarian transportation primarily serves practical purposes, such as commuting to work, running errands, or reaching specific destinations.ⁱ

Asset-Based Community Development is an approach to working with communities that begins by recognizing the assets of the community and shows how organizing to mobilize those positive aspects is key to asserting power and agency to bring about change.ⁱⁱ

Community Engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations to address issues affecting the wellbeing of those people. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.ⁱⁱⁱ

Complete Streets is an approach to planning, designing, and building streets that enables safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets encompasses many approaches to planning, designing, and operating roadways and rights of way with all users in mind to make the transportation network safer and more efficient. Key features include sidewalks, protected bikeways, special bus lanes, comfortable and accessible transit stops, frequent crossing opportunities, median islands, accessible pedestrian signals, and curb extensions.^{iv, v}

Green Spaces typically refer to land with natural vegetation, including grass, trees, and other plants, that is open and accessible to the public. Green spaces can include parks, walkable streets with trees and plantings, planted lots, and gardens.^{vi, vii}

Health Equity is the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health. Achieving health equity requires valuing everyone with focused and ongoing societal efforts to address avoidable inequalities and injustices, and the elimination of health and healthcare disparities.^{viii, ix}

- i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community Design Definitions. Retrieved January 2026 from www.cdc.gov/physical-activity/php/community-design-definitions/index.html
- ii Asset Based Community Development Institute. About. Retrieved January 2026 from https://abcdinstitute.clubexpress.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=104994&module_id=693983
- iii Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, Community Engagement Key Function Committee, Task Force on the Principles of Community Engagement; Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (U.S.); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.); National Institute of Health (U.S.). Principles of Community Engagement: Second Edition. 2011.
- iv Smart Growth America. Complete Streets: The Backbone of a Healthy Community. Retrieved January 2026 from www.smartgrowthamerica.org/program-of-work/complete-streets
- v Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community Design Definitions. Retrieved January 2026 from www.cdc.gov/physical-activity/php/community-design-definitions/index.html
- vi Caoimhe Twohig-Bennett, Andy Jone. The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. Environmental Research, Volume 166. 2018. Pages 628-637. ISSN 0013-9351.
- vii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces. Retrieved January 2026 from www.cdc.gov/active-people-healthy-nation/php/tools/parks-rec.html
- viii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. February 5, 2024. About Health Equity. Retrieved January 2026 from www.cdc.gov/health-disparities/hiv-std-tb-hepatitis/about/index.html
- ix World Health Organization. Health Equity. Retrieved January 2026 from www.who.int/health-topics/health-equity#tab=tab_1

- x Peavy, E., HKS Inc. Connecting IRL: How the Built Environment Can Foster Social Health. 2020. www.hksinc.com/how-we-think/reports/connecting-irl-how-the-built-environment-can-foster-social-health/.
- xi County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. Open Streets. Retrieved January 2026 from www.countyhealthrankings.org/strategies-and-solutions/what-works-for-health/strategies/open-streets.
- xii Candace I.J. Nykiforuk, Helen Vallianatos, Laura M. Nieuwendyk. 2011. Photovoice as a Method for Revealing Community Perceptions of the Built and Social Environment. Retrieved January 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000201>.
- xiii U.S. Department of Arts and Culture. March 8, 2016 Creative Placemaking, Placekeeping, and Cultural Strategies to Resist Displacement. Retrieved January 2026 from <https://usdac.us/blogac/2017/12/11/creative-placemaking-placekeeping-and-cultural-strategies-to-resist-displacement>.
- xiv County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. Open Streets. Retrieved January 2026 from www.countyhealthrankings.org/strategies-and-solutions/what-works-for-health/strategies/open-streets.
- xv Esmonde K, Pollack Porter KM, Mahoney P, Prochnow T, Bridges Hamilton CN, Umstattd Meyer MR. Lessons from sustainability of Play Streets in the United States. Preventive Medicine Reports, Volume 28, 2022, 101894
- xvi Trust for Public Land. Pocket Park Toolkit. 2020. Retrieved January 2026 from https://www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Pocket-Park-Toolkit_FINAL.pdf#page=5
- xvii Youth.gov. Positive Youth Development. Retrieved January 2026 from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>

Human-Scale Design uses architectural detailing and variety to create small and intimate environments that are comfortable for people to move through or occupy. These spaces meet basic human needs for comfort and safety, and are shown to promote more social interactions and lingering.^x

Open Streets allow community members to gather, socialize, walk, run, bike, skate, dance, or participate in other activities on streets temporarily closed to motorized traffic. Open Streets events are free and designed for people of all ages and abilities.^{xi}

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that has participants use photography, and stories about their photos, to identify and represent issues of importance to them, which enables researchers to have a greater understanding of the issue under study.^{xii}

Placekeeping is the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there. It is not just preserving buildings, but also keeping the cultural memories associated with a locale alive, while supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose.^{xiii}

Play Streets are a type of Open Streets focused on children playing outdoors. Play Streets involve temporarily closing streets to motorists, usually for several hours at a time, to create a safe place for active playtime, often including play equipment (e.g., playground balls, hula hoops, and jump ropes), supervision, and food to those who attend. Play Streets have the potential to encourage active playtime and have a positive impact on communities by improving safety and increasing community engagement and feelings of connectedness.^{xiv, xv}

Pocket Parks are public park spaces occupying less than one acre of land, and built with the intention of providing communities in the park’s immediate vicinity with the benefits of a public park. Pocket parks use scaled-down features and recreational amenities to relay the same benefits of larger parks while occupying a fraction of the space.^{xvi}

Positive Youth Development Approach is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.^{xvii}

Protective Environments are physical spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, towns, cities, youth-serving organizations or institutions, and other areas (e.g., streets, parks, and public transportation hubs) where individuals regularly interact. These spaces can help create a sense of safety, inclusion, and belonging.^{xviii}

A **Public Health Practitioner** is a person educated in public health or a related discipline who is employed to improve health through a population focus. Public health professionals contribute to improving the health of the public in numerous ways: they develop and implement programs designed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases; conduct research aimed at determining effectiveness of health intervention programs and translating the results of other research to solve real-world health problems; work with policy makers to translate science into practical policies; and work with communities to address the wide range of community-identified public health problems. Public health professionals are critical to assuring that the public health system is prepared to respond to community challenges and threats.^{xix}

Social Connection can encompass the interactions, relationships, roles, and sense of connection that individuals, communities, or society may experience. An individual’s level of social connection is influenced by several factors, including the presence and diversity of people in their social network, the functions of their relationships (i.e., if these relationships can provide support), and whether their relationships positively or negatively influence their life.^{xx,xxi}

Third Places are the places outside of the home (the first place) and the workplace (the second place) where people go to converse with others and connect with their community.^{xxii}

Violence Prevention involves valuing every person and their health; improving social and economic conditions that can harm people’s health; and working with different groups to address health issues that affect them. This includes addressing the challenges that youth may be facing, such as harmful narratives around race and violence. Preventing community violence involves addressing the underlying conditions that contribute to violence, including those that are driven by systemic inequities and discrimination—or the unfair treatment of people or groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, class, or sexual orientation.^{xxiii}

Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all.^{xxiv}

xviii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action: A Compilation of the Best Available Evidence for Youth and Young Adults. 2024; pg.7. Retrieved January 2026 from https://www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/media/pdf/resources-for-action/CV-Prevention-Resource-for-Action_508.pdf

xix Institute of Medicine Committee on Educating Public Health Professionals for the 21st Century; Gebbie K, Rosenstock L, Hernandez LM, editors. 2003. Who Will Keep the Public Healthy? Educating Public Health Professionals for the 21st Century. Retrieved January 2026 from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK221192/

xx Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Retrieved January 2026 from www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

xxi Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Social Connection. May 15, 2024. Retrieved January 2026 from <https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/about/index.html>

xxii Roberts-Ganim M. University of Chicago English Language Institute. Third Places: What Are They and Why Are They Important to American Culture? Retrieved January 2026 from <https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/>

xxiii Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action: A Compilation of the Best Available Evidence for Youth and Young Adults. 2024; pg.7. Retrieved January 2026 from https://www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/media/pdf/resources-for-action/CV-Prevention-Resource-for-Action_508.pdf

xxiv Vision Zero Network. What is Vision Zero? Retrieved January 2026 from <https://visionzeronetWORK.org/about/what-is-vision-zero/>

Resources

ABOUT THIS ACTION GUIDE

Community Violence Prevention Resource for Action

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed this resource to help community leaders prevent violence. www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/media/pdf/resources-for-action/CV-Prevention-Resource-for-Action_508.pdf

Firearm Violence: A Public Health Crisis in America

In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory which describes programs for firearm injury and violence prevention. www.ncdsv.org/uploads/1/4/2/2/142238266/2024-us-surgeon-generals-advisory-on-firearm-violence.pdf

Prevention Institute

Offers recommendations for how communities can prevent gun violence, support community planning, and implement comprehensive community safety plans that include prevention and intervention. www.preventioninstitute.org/unity/strategic-plans/examples

Community Safety Realized

This Prevention Institute report describes how the science and practice of public health and the values of equity and justice can shape community-driven, multi-sector approaches to safety. www.preventioninstitute.org/publications/community-safety-realized-public-health-pathways-preventing-violence

Community Violence Intervention: A Summer Toolkit

From Cities United. <https://www.citiesunited.org/resources#>

A Guide to Investing in Safe, Healthy, & Hopeful Communities

From Cities United. <https://www.citiesunited.org/resources#>

Framing Community Safety: Guidance for Effective Communication

From Frameworks Institute and Prevention Institute. www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/framing-community-safety-guidance-for-effective-communication/

Changing the Story About Park and Green Space Equity: A Messaging Guide for Advocates

From Berkeley Media Studies Group. www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/changing-the-story-about-park-and-green-space-equity-a-messaging-guide-for-advocates/#what-do-audiences-think-about-parks-equity-and-green-space

Being Black in Public Safety Report

From the Toronto Foundation. <https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BBIP-SurveyReport-JPP-2025.pdf>

IMPROVE PARKS AND GREEN SPACES FOR SAFE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Plan4Health

The Planning and Community Health program leads the first nationwide program linking public health and planning practice. www.planning.org/nationalcenters/health/

Active Parks! Increasing Physical Activity Through Parks, Trails, and Greenways

This guide from the National Recreation and Parks Association indicates that public health and park and recreation professionals can increase physical activity and the use of parks, trails, and greenways by combining 1) essential infrastructure improvements with 2) additional activities like community engagement, programming, public awareness, and other access enhancements. This implementation guide includes resources and case studies to illustrate key steps of the process. www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/active-parks-implementation-guide.pdf

Advocacy Toolkit for Park Equity, Life Expectancy, and Power Building

This toolkit from the Prevention Institute contains materials to support community-based organizations, their members, and others who are building power to secure equitable investments in park infrastructure in disinvested communities. It also includes a policy brief that lays out a framework for achieving park equity and proposes 12 policy recommendations aimed at reversing park inequity within the context of the Los Angeles region. www.preventioninstitute.org/tools/advocacy-toolkit-park-equity-life-expectancy-and-power-building

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Climate Interactive

An organization that creates and shares tools that drive effective and equitable climate action. www.climateinteractive.org

Community Conditions Can Impact Risk of Violence

A section in the Prevention Resource. www.cdc.gov/violence-prevention/media/pdf/resources-for-action/CV-Prevention-Resource-for-Action_508.pdf#page=60

A Framework for Assessing Equitable Health Outcomes of Parks

This report from the Urban Institute offers a framework that park practitioners and community leaders can use to assess how equitable their park system is, identify how their park system improves health outcomes for users, and understand how parks address health disparities. The framework provides a structured approach with five steps: identifying park characteristics, examining access, measuring health outcomes, estimating economic benefits, and promoting equity. www.urban.org/research/publication/framework-assessing-equitable-health-outcomes-parks

Parks, Recreation, and Green Spaces

This hub from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compiles information, resources, and case studies for park and recreation professionals about how to influence community health and increase physical activity through safe, equitable, and inclusive access to parks, trails, recreation areas, and green spaces. www.cdc.gov/active-people-healthy-nation/php/tools/parks-rec.html

DESIGN THIRD PLACES TO SUPPORT HEALTH AND SAFETY

Connecting IRL: How the Built Environment Can Foster Social Health

A report by E. Peavey, 2020, HKS Inc. www.hksinc.com/how-we-think/reports/connecting-irl-how-the-built-environment-can-foster-social-health/

Guide to Implementing Play Streets in Rural Communities

This guide from the Physical Activity Research Center describes how rural communities can create Play Streets by temporarily closing streets to create safe, publicly accessible spaces where children and families can be active and connect with neighbors. It provides information about the planning process, case studies, successes, challenges, and lessons learned. https://publichealth.robins.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbykj1291/files/2023-09/guide_to_implementing_play_streets_in_rural_communities_352.pdf

Strategies for Access to Places for Physical Activity

This hub from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compiles information, resources, and case studies that support communities to create or improve access to places like public parks and trails, fitness and recreational facilities, and workplaces for physical activity. www.cdc.gov/physical-activity/php/strategies/access-to-places.html

The Open Streets Toolkit

This toolkit from the Open Streets Project compiles the best practices for organizations and cities that are interested in hosting an Open Streets event in their community. The toolkit is divided into six sections that provide guidance on the initial planning stages, planning the route, funding the event, marketing the event, managing the operational and logistical details, and designing an evaluation plan. www.openstreetsproject.org/open-streets-toolkit/

REMEDiate VACANT LOTS

Creative Placemaking Resources

This hub from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) compiles resources developed by NEA and its partners that support creative placemaking practitioners in the arts sector to advance positive, equitable change in their communities. These resources include materials for conducting evaluations, building knowledge, and providing technical assistance. www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking/creative-placemaking-resources

How Local Governments Can Facilitate Creative Placemaking on Vacant Property: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This report from the Center for Community Progress highlights three common challenges that communities encounter when pursuing creative placemaking. It provides scalable policy and implementation recommendations to guide local government officials and policymakers on how to overcome these challenges by creating policy environments that facilitate creative placemaking. www.communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-08-creative-placemaking-barriers.pdf

The Toolkit for Health, Arts, Parks, and Equity

This toolkit from the Trust for Public Land; National Association of County & City Health Officials supports public health, arts, and park practitioners in using place-based arts and culture to promote health equity. The toolkit includes guiding principles, case studies, policy recommendations, insights, and lessons learned from the field. www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Toolkit-for-HAP-E.pdf.

The Resident’s Workbook for Dealing with Vacant Buildings and Lots

This workbook from the Center for Community Progress supports community members who are interested in turning vacant buildings and lots into vibrant spaces. The workbook contains worksheets, tips, and ideas that guide community members through the revitalization process. www.communityprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-10-Resident-Workbook.pdf

Vacant Land Stewardship

This hub from the Center for Community Progress includes a variety of reports, case studies, and toolkits that help communities across the United States turn vacant spaces into vibrant places. www.communityprogress.org/publications/?fwp__topic=vacant-land-stewardship

Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots

This Urban Neighborhood Initiative guide includes resources, design templates, and ideas to help communities who want to transform their neighborhood’s vacant spaces into attractive and environmentally beneficial places. www.uni-kc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UNI-VACANT-TO-VIBRANT-GUIDE.pdf

PROMOTE POLICIES THAT STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTION

Social Isolation and Health

This health policy brief from Health Affairs describes the health impacts of social isolation and includes a proposed policy agenda that outlines the key elements of addressing social isolation. www.healthaffairs.org/content/briefs/social-isolation-and-health

Regenerating Connection within Communities: Reimagining the Role of Policy

This report from Connective Tissue describes the connective tissue framework and how policymakers can apply it to engage in connection-focused policymaking. The report is organized into four major sections—Foundational Changes, Community Institutions, Life Transitions, and Enabling Conditions—that offer related policy opportunities, case studies, and additional resources for taking action. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/667c77121cc4f67618399123/t/66abd21d64c1d207823690f9/1722536479855/Connective+Tissue+Policy+Framework+-+July+2024.pdf>

INVEST IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Community-Centered Economic Inclusion: A Strategic Action Playbook

This playbook from the Brookings Institute and Local Initiative Support Corporation provides community, city, and regional leaders with an actionable set of tools to create equitable landscapes of neighborhood opportunity through a community-centered economic inclusion approach, which is a multidisciplinary and systems-level approach to building community wealth in underinvested places that also supports equitable city and regional growth. www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Brookings-Playbook.pdf

TAKING ACTION

Language Justice Toolkit

From Communities Creating Healthy Environments. www.nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/language_justice_toolkit.pdf

The Planner’s Playbook: A Community-Centered Approach to Improving Health & Equity

This guide from ChangeLab Solutions supports planners, decisionmakers, and other city planning practitioners who want to center equity in their practice. The guide includes information, resources, real-world examples, and practical steps about how to incorporate equity into the planning process. www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/ThePlannersPlaybook_FINAL_20201207.pdf

Endnotes

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- 5 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Office of the Surgeon General. 2023; pg.41. Retrieved August 2024 from www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf
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- 21 Love H. Want to reduce violence? Invest in place. Brookings Institute. 2021. Retrieved August 2024 from www.brookings.edu/articles/want-to-reduce-violence-invest-in-place/
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The places where people live, learn, and spend time together have a powerful impact on their health and wellbeing. When public places are both safe and welcoming, people are more likely to use them for exercise and social connection. Preventing violence in these spaces is essential for both physical and social health.

Building Safe, Active, and Connected Communities for Youth and Young Adults: An Action Guide offers policies, programs, practices, and community examples to help public health practitioners, advocates, researchers, and community members create safer, more equitable spaces where all young people can thrive.



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