

Social Connection: An Investment Multiplier

**The highest-leverage investment for community health,
resilience, and equity is within reach**

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Overview

Every foundation faces the same math problem: philanthropic dollars are small relative to the systems they are trying to move, like health care, housing, and transportation. However, a synthesis of more than a dozen reports points to a specific and genuine multiplier of those investments: **social connection**. The rippling benefits of strengthening social connections in sector-based strategies, policy advocacy, civic engagement, and more can deepen and sustain the intended outcomes of systems work. Fortunately, the infrastructure that brings people together—places like parks, libraries, and schools plus civic organizations—exists in many communities; it simply needs to be intentionally designed and programmed.

Why This Matters

Social connection functions simultaneously as a health determinant, a resilience mechanism, and a multiplier which can support every other community investment. Socially connected communities are measurably healthier, safer, more economically prosperous, and more resilient to shocks (e.g. climate, economic, or public). The evidence is clear:

- Loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of premature death, comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In addition, poor social connection increases risk of heart disease, stroke, anxiety, depression, dementia, and more.
- After Hurricane Katrina, tightly bonded Vietnamese American neighborhoods rebuilt quickly, and over 90% of their residents returned within one year, faring better than less socially connected areas, such as the French Quarter.
- Various studies show a correlation between social cohesion and trust and reduced crime and community violence. One study showed that a one standard deviation increase in social connectedness was associated with a 21% reduction in murders and a 20% reduction in motor vehicle thefts.
- Disconnection is unevenly distributed, falling hardest on people with lower incomes and less education, young men, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and rural and marginalized places. Therefore, investing in social connection *is* investing in health equity — and disinvestment is not neutral.

Four Necessary Community Conditions

People learn, work, play, live, and age, in communities, so this is the best context in which to impact social connection. The literature converges on four community conditions that interact to support social connection.

1. Public Spaces as Community Hubs. A community's public spaces (e.g., libraries, parks, greenspaces, transit) can be community hubs which actively drive social connection and improve health. When well-designed and activated, public spaces help people engage with each other, promote a sense of belonging, and encourage civic engagement. Poorly designed spaces can exacerbate feelings of isolation and division. Post-WWII highway and housing policy, and car-centric planning more broadly, have eroded these important spaces. Also, no single space meets every need. Neighborhoods with a mix of indoor and outdoor places to rest, play, learn, and create, linked by safe, walkable streets and greenways, show the widest range of social connections. Everyday free or low-cost activities draw more consistent and diverse use than occasional large events.

Recommendation: Fund community-led conversations and assessments to understand which public spaces support social connection, who does and doesn't feel welcome in those spaces, where gathering spaces are needed, and for whom? After community members and sector-based partners collectively determine needs, philanthropic investments can create multi-solving assets. For example, a single trail or community center upgrade returns physical-activity, connection, climate-resilience, and equity value at once. This condition's return depends on the next one: a well-built space needs organizational support to sustain it.

2. Community-Based Organizational Life. Many reports reference sociologist Eric Klinenberg's finding that Chicago neighborhoods with strong community institutions had dramatically lower mortality during the 1995 heat wave – direct evidence that the durability of nonprofits, schools, and neighborhood associations converts physical proximity into life-saving relationships. Chronic underfunding and volunteer-only staffing are repeatedly identified as the point where these institutions fail. In a New York Community, one after-school program needed about 40 separate grants to operate. Stable funding is needed over one-off grants for operations, maintenance, and staff.

Recommendation: Fund general operating support and multi-year staff continuity for organizations that sustain social life. Consider paid community stewards who program public spaces and welcome people into them. Provide staff training on social connection strategies and on collaborative leadership skills so they can effectively build trust, share power, manage conflict, and cultivate inclusive leadership with residents and partners.

3. Policy Design. Federal highway policy, exclusionary zoning, and service-delivery models engineered the isolation many communities now experience. This means policy is a legitimate and necessary condition to engineer social connection back into community life.

Recommendation: Fund research (especially community-based participatory research and community-led qualitative information gathering), advocacy efforts, and technical assistance to help government leaders make policy decisions that strengthen social

connection, such as simplifying the permitting, licensing, and insurance requirements that make it hard for community groups to program and care for public spaces. A landscape analysis of relevant policies, agencies, and collaborative efforts can ensure policy design changes amplify other investments. A single policy shift could multiply the value of every grant made, without requiring proportionally larger capital outlay.

4. Culture and Norms. Culture and strategy are mutually reinforcing. Therefore, the above three conditions work best when communities embrace a culture of connection. Fewer people feel a sense of belonging in their community (26%) than in their family (60%). And people *want* more social solidarity. A More in Common study revealed that opportunity, not apathy or hostility, is the primary barrier cited to connecting with others in their community.

Recommendation: Fund and support multi-sector councils or coalitions to advance social connection *with* community members through co-designed strategies that honor and address diverse cultural contexts and needs. Public art, events, intergenerational programming, and narrative or storytelling work can help produce spaces, institutions, and policies that truly create a sense of belonging.

Community Example. Activating Boston (AB) is funded by John Hancock in partnership with AARP of Massachusetts, MA Coalition to Build Community & End Isolation, and City of Boston agencies. Through AB, seven neighborhood teams of community-based organizations, community members, and partners are increasing social connectedness using public green spaces such as parks and other open spaces, community gardens, transit hubs, and alleyways, and by developing neighborhood social connection plans. Young people are engaged in design roles and often serve as event organizers and advocates for socially connected spaces. Evaluation results show stronger partnerships, social bonds, and civic engagement, plus shared spaces as hubs for connection. Engaged community members expressed strong interest in future social connection opportunities and a strong sense of belonging to their local community.

The Time is Now

People need community places that help them flourish together. A well-placed bench, a walkable trail, a library that stays open, a street that closes for a block party: these are not amenities. They are essential infrastructure and the social fabric that keeps people alive, resilient, and thriving. For a foundation weighing where to invest limited dollars to maximize their impact, social connection multiplies community wins alongside health, resilience, and equity. It is the solution that multiplies all three at once, and the evidence base to justify that investment is now substantial, quantified, and actionable.

Prepared by Healthy Places by Design. This summary is a synthesis of published research and policy analysis; it is intended for strategic and philanthropic planning purposes only.

To discuss or brainstorm ideas for strengthening social connection in your community, contact Risa Wilkerson, Executive Director, at Risaw@healthyplacesbydesign.org, or Teresita Maz, Deputy Director, at teresitam@healthyplacesbydesign.org.

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