

# Socially Connected Communities

Solutions for Social Isolation



HEALTHY  
PLACES  
BY DESIGN



# **Socially Connected Communities**

**Solutions for Social Isolation**

**Healthy Places by Design**  
[www.healthyplacesbydesign.org](http://www.healthyplacesbydesign.org)

**Social Isolation Learning Network**  
with support from the  
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Rates of social isolation have soared around the world, with profound impacts on health and well-being.



# Forward

MARCH 2021

## Social Isolation in the Context of COVID-19 and Racial Justice

The efforts that contributed to this report began in 2017 when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)'s Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions team invested in an initiative to better understand social isolation and how to address it.

In recent decades, people in the United States and around the world have experienced soaring rates of social isolation, with profound impacts on health and well-being. These impacts are felt most acutely by people who are marginalized because of their race, income, location, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Isolation is also exacerbated by commonly-experienced disruptive events such as changes in a person's family, home, or employment status.

Although efforts to address social isolation began *before* the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus further exacerbated health disparities and shuttered many of the gathering places that had served as antidotes to isolation. The pandemic also forced RWJF's grantees to adjust their strategies, since their initial proposals had included in-person events. When the Social Isolation Learning Network formed in early 2020, it proved to be a timely resource for collective brainstorming about how to connect people in innovative ways.

With the compounding and interrelated health, economic, and racial justice crises, the unique events of 2020 provided an opportunity to think about the potentially restorative aspects of new strategies and better understand how racism and other systems of oppression drive social isolation. The public health crisis impelled us to develop creative approaches to connect with one another (e.g., virtual platforms) while simultaneously acknowledging that inequitable access to information technology may widen existing disparities.

Wishing to share what they had learned more broadly, participants in the Social Isolation Learning Network co-created this report with support from Healthy Places by Design. Throughout multiple conversations, we identified specific gaps in the national conversation and underscored the need to address social isolation through a systemic lens.

As we collectively seek to address the overlapping health, economic, and racial justice crises made more evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to recognize social connection as a public health priority and as a tool for healing and rebuilding.<sup>1</sup>

**The lessons and recommendations shared in this report are meant to inspire collective action to solve this complex problem.**

# Recommendations for Creating Socially Connected Communities

## RECOMMENDATION 1

### Design, Maintain, and Activate Inclusive Public Spaces

- Co-create inclusive, healthy public spaces.
- Design safe places for all ages to gather.
- Equitably maintain the quality of public spaces.
- Activate public spaces to encourage healthy social interaction.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

### Prioritize Connection in Transportation Systems

- Think "people first."
- Use policy levers to promote health and equity.
- Support elements that enhance public life.

## RECOMMENDATION 3

### Construct Housing Environments that Build Community

- Strengthen and safeguard inclusive, affordable housing.
- Include spaces specifically designed for gatherings.
- Zone to encourage diversity.

## RECOMMENDATION 4

### Invest in Inclusive Practices and Community-led Solutions

- Shift power to community members.
- Elevate practices rooted in culture.
- Harness creative communication channels.
- Create universal broadband access.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

### Make Social Connectedness a Community Norm

- Use a Social in All Policies framework.
- Implement trauma- and resilience-informed practices.
- Declare community values.



# Executive Summary

Using lessons learned from the **healthy communities movement**,<sup>2</sup> the Social Isolation Learning Network co-created this report to help reframe the national conversation toward one that recognizes the root causes of, and systemic solutions to, social isolation. This report seeks to inspire and equip all readers—especially **grantmaking organizations** and **local government leaders**—to intentionally redesign community-level systems to support meaningful social connections.

Guided by the concepts of Abundance Thinking, Equity and Inclusion, and Cultural and Historic Context, the Learning Network developed recommendations related to housing, transportation, and public spaces (as starting points) along with two overarching, multi-sector recommendations.


Although grantmaking organizations and local leaders already seek to create healthy communities, they must also prioritize social well-being, which includes rebuilding broken trust in government and institutions. During Heathy Places by Design's two-decade history of supporting community partnerships across the United States, we've seen that efforts to create community-led change are more effective when residents have local government leader support (from multiple sectors) and investments (of resources and partnerships) from philanthropic foundations. To support this need, we developed complementary Action Guides that local government leaders and grantmaking organizations can use as tailored supplements to the first version of this report. Future versions may expand beyond these two groups.

Everyone has a role to play in creating socially connected communities. We encourage all readers to use the recommendations in this report to prompt ideas for action within your own spheres of influence.

## Healthy Communities Movement

The healthy communities field transformed how public health and other leaders approach health. It advanced efforts beyond "programs and promotions" to a collaborative, place-based, and multi-sector approach. The movement recognized that it can be ineffective, or even harmful, to tell people how to be healthy without also ensuring that they have access to resources, environments, and social networks that support healthy choices.

**Grantmaking organizations** have experience supporting collaborative processes and can serve as neutral parties, especially when they take intentional steps to avoid perpetuating inequitable power dynamics. **Local government leaders** are decision makers for community policies, investments, and practices. They can influence public opinion and inspire other organizations and governments.



**Strong social  
connections and  
networks can  
boost a person's  
lifespan by  
50 percent.**

**Scientific American<sup>3</sup>**

A meta-study of more than 300,000 participants across all ages reveals that strong social networks are linked to longer lives.

# Introduction

Leaders who strive to create resilient, equitable, and **healthy communities** often focus on physical and mental well-being by addressing conditions that impact the quality, safety, and affordability of housing, health care, education, food, recreation, and transportation, as well as access to jobs and clean air and water. However, social connection is often excluded from these priorities despite its vital contribution to health and well-being.

Social well-being refers to the strength of a person's relationships and social networks. It is strongly linked to social inclusion and a sense of belonging. People living in socially connected communities are more likely to thrive because they feel safe, welcome, and trust each other and their government. Trusting and meaningful relationships enhance our mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being. In fact, strong social connections and networks can boost a person's lifespan by 50 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine a socially connected community where people know and trust their neighbors *and* people from different neighborhoods. Where they are motivated and supported (through fair processes and practices) to be civically engaged. Where structures, policies, and relationships connect residents to important services, resources, and inclusive spaces. And where, through various **signals**, people see themselves represented and feel welcomed in their community.

During this pivotal moment in history, it is more important than ever for local leaders to work with residents to create socially connected communities. This priority can help address past and current traumas due to structural and systemic oppression, and build more cohesive, resilient, and equitable communities where everyone is able to thrive.

**A healthy community** is one that enables *all* its residents to experience complete physical, mental, and social well-being.

**Signals of belonging** can include public art and signage, culturally appropriate programs, and dignity-preserving practices such as using a person's preferred name, title, and pronouns.

## The Health Risks of Social Isolation and Loneliness

- Equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes per day or having alcohol use disorder
- Twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity
- Linked to depression, poor sleep quality, accelerated cognitive decline and impaired immunity
- Linked to increases in suicidal ideation/attempts and self-harm
- Increases the risk of stroke and coronary heart disease
- Increases the risk of premature mortality

**LGBTQ** is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning.

## What Is Social Isolation?

Social isolation—the lack of significant social connections interpersonally and within a community—is a public health crisis. Who is socially isolated? Although better data is still needed, current metrics indicate that people of all ages, demographics, and identities experience isolation. For example, in 2004, nearly 25 percent of adults in the United States (U.S.) said that they had zero people in their network with whom they could discuss important matters (up from 10 percent in 1985).<sup>4</sup> In a 2018 study, more than half of adults had one or fewer confidants.<sup>5</sup>

Social isolation is linked to increased risk of death from all causes. Social isolation is exacerbated by experiences such as long-term illness or disability, domestic violence, loss of a loved one, becoming a caregiver, having a baby, moving to a new place, migration, being rejected by family members and peers when coming out as **LGBTQ**, incarceration, and homelessness. In other words, it is widespread.

People who are most susceptible to social isolation are those who feel that they do not belong to majority social groups because of their gender identity, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, among other factors. Among LGBTQ youth, social isolation has been associated with higher rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempt.<sup>6</sup> Additional groups at risk are new mothers; immigrants; people living in rural areas; people with disabilities; and individuals and families struggling to make ends meet.<sup>7</sup> Overall, race seems to be a stronger predictor of social isolation than biological sex or gender; White men and women were more likely to be in the least-isolated category than were Black men and women.<sup>8</sup> Consider the impact, then, on people who experience intersectional marginalized identities (e.g., being Black and trans and poor and rural).

## Social Isolation Learning Network

Upon learning that this is also a global crisis, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)'s Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions team issued a call for proposals in 2017 designed to support change makers as they adapted great ideas from around the world for addressing social isolation in the United States. RWJF funded six projects, which are described in *Solutions for Social Isolation: What We Can Learn from the World*,<sup>9</sup> a brief about the initiative which also highlights lessons learned from reviewing 200 applications from 11 countries. These six projects reached diverse places and people: vulnerable families in West Baltimore, MD; isolated rural youth in Matanuska Susitna Borough of AK; incarcerated people in CT, MA, and NJ; Latinx LGBTQ youth in OR; and people living in three American cities with harsh winter climates.

Funded projects within the U.S. partnered with their peers in other countries. These international partnerships practiced reciprocal learning and gained insights about addressing social isolation by sharing victories and challenges. The full cohort of partners began learning with each other in 2020, when Healthy Places by Design partnered with RWJF to manage and lead a Social Isolation Learning Network among partners of all six projects, and connected them to other practitioners focusing on reducing social isolation. As participants in the Social Isolation Learning Network shared ideas, stories, and questions with each other, they gained their own sense of community and began to see potential new solutions from the perspectives of their peers.

Through a series of conversations and activities, the Social Isolation Learning Network explored key challenges, trends, lessons, and themes from the members' work. We recognized the importance of cross-sector, cross-community, and cross-country learning for advancing solutions to social isolation as well as the need to frame these solutions with a community-level lens. We also co-created and tested guiding concepts throughout these conversations. These concepts included abundance thinking, prioritizing equity and inclusion, and honoring history and culture. We also recognized the need for a different narrative about the root causes of social isolation.

To clarify the **distinction between social isolation and loneliness**, the authors of *Solutions for Social Isolation: What We Can Learn from the World* explain:

"Social isolation is a state in which a person lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, and has minimal social contacts which do not lead to fulfilling and quality relationships. Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness when someone perceives that their social needs are not met by the quantity and, especially, the quality of their social relationships."

## Reframing the Conversation

The need to reframe the conversation around social isolation was a salient, overarching theme that emerged among participants in the Learning Network. Currently, isolation is being defined, discussed, and addressed primarily through an individual lens rather than a systemic one. This can be seen most vividly by the frequent conflation of the terms **social isolation and loneliness**. While loneliness describes the individual experience and perception of being alone, we must move past this individual frame to find the contextual, root causes of social isolation in order to identify community-level and structural factors that can be changed to address them.

The Social Isolation Learning Network recognized that these definitions and conversations may inadvertently blame individuals for experiencing social isolation. As David Hsu, author of *Untethered: A Primer on Social Isolation*, explains, this tendency to label socially isolated people as "hermits" or "loners" frames isolation "[as] largely a consequence of individual choices, failures, or traits."<sup>10</sup> However, as noted in the previous section, it is critical to recognize that where we live affects our relationships with other people.

The rise of social isolation is not a personal choice or individual problem, but one that is rooted in community design, social norms, and systemic injustices.



# Guiding Concepts

Learning network participants discussed the importance of addressing social isolation as a structural issue and recognizing how community context and social norms affect a person's ability to be socially connected. Community context includes local and regional systems such as criminal justice, education, food, health care, housing, parks and recreation, and transportation. The design and policies of these systems represent comprehensive, integrated, and sustainable ways to improve population health by addressing many of the root causes that contribute to inequitable health outcomes. This is just as true for social isolation as it is for any other public health issue.

Drawing from their experiences working in social justice and health equity, participants in the Social Isolation Learning Network agreed that the following guiding concepts are a critical foundation for the recommendations presented in this report.

## GUIDING CONCEPT

### Abundance Thinking

Abundance thinking is a mindset that focuses on assets and what is possible, rather than on deficits and pitfalls. It is the belief that there are enough resources, creativity, and wisdom to meet our needs, and that we are capable of achieving more tomorrow than we can imagine today. Just as one can take a flame from one fire in order to start another one without diminishing the first fire, an abundance mindset recognizes the catalyzing power of inclusive collaboration.

In addition, rather than believing that we must "protect" our knowledge or resources, abundance thinkers have cultural humility; they understand the benefit of sharing lessons with each other and learning from other countries and communities. This is not a zero-sum game where sharing with others diminishes our own supply.

One promising way to create socially connected communities may be to recognize, celebrate, and reinforce assets which are inherent in local communities and social support systems. For example, an asset-based approach might amplify stories of how a group has overcome marginalization. It is also important to acknowledge and support the fact that every resident and neighborhood has assets and the ability to lead their own change.

Therefore, the recommendations in this report are based on the belief that we can create socially connected communities by using an abundance thinking mindset, focusing on assets instead of deficits, and by strategically leveraging these assets.

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

## Equity and Inclusion

Although abundance thinking celebrates diverse communities' assets, legacies of injustice have also made it more difficult to leverage those assets. Our Guiding Concepts emphasize the importance of acknowledging inequities and providing resources and equal opportunities to correct them. Social isolation disproportionately impacts groups of people who are commonly marginalized, treated as "others," or oppressed. This includes Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC); LGBTQ people; those living in low-income neighborhoods; and people who have experienced homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment.

Unless solutions to social isolation are centered in inclusive and anti-racist/anti-othering approaches, greater inequity is a probable unintended consequence. Moreover, Learning Network participants discussed the disadvantages of speaking only about the problem—"social isolation"—rather than articulating desired outcomes and possible futures, such as "socially connected communities" that foster "a sense of **belonging**." Learning Network participants also began exploring the idea of "absolute belonging," which speaks to the idea that *nobody* should feel ignored or marginalized.

The **Othering and Belonging Institute** explains, "Belonging or being fully human means more than having access. Belonging entails being respected at a basic level that includes the right to both co-create and make demands upon society."

In *Solutions for Social Isolation: What We Can Learn from the World*, the authors highlight the need to elevate inequity as a root cause of social isolation, noting, "People who experience inequities and are isolated from opportunity because of where they live, how much money they make or the color of their skin more often experience social isolation. Addressing inequities should be at the front and center of all efforts to strengthen social connectedness."

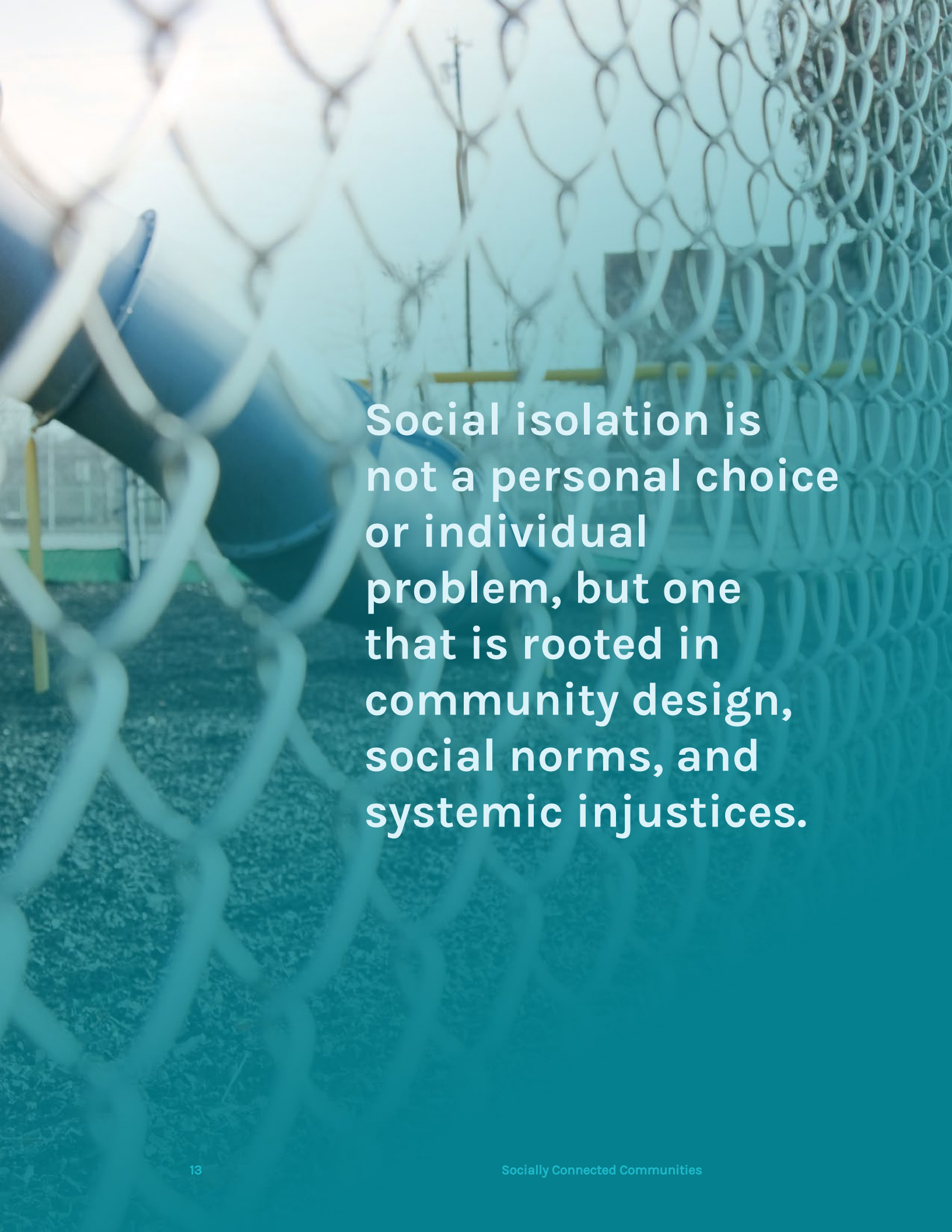
#### GUIDING CONCEPT

### Cultural and Historic Context

In order to generate meaningful, long-term approaches to creating socially connected communities, it is vital that we recognize and honor communities' cultural and historical contexts. Consider historic injustices such as hyper-segregated neighborhoods that have isolated people by race or class, and disinvestments in specific neighborhoods that, over time, have created unsafe conditions for residents to spend time together in public spaces.

Social norms and biases can also make it more difficult to connect with others. For example, it can be difficult for men and boys of color to find places to gather safely. Fear of brutality drives parents of color to have "the talk" with their children about how to behave when questioned by the police. In addition, social constructs related to gender further drive isolation. Hyper-masculinity (or "toxic masculinity") can discourage help-seeking, limit the ability to express emotions, and discourage the development of meaningful relationships. A historic lack of recognition of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in legal documents, schools, and healthcare settings may compound their isolation from society.

Every community has its own culture, assets, history of achievement, and challenges on which to build. When funders and local leaders fully recognize and understand these unique community settings, it helps direct strategies and tactics to better align with and leverage various dynamics at play.



**Social isolation is not a personal choice or individual problem, but one that is rooted in community design, social norms, and systemic injustices.**

# Recommendations for Creating Socially Connected Communities

## Overview

For decades, the healthy communities field has demonstrated that where we are live, learn, work, play, and age impacts our health. As noted in the introduction, the conditions that impact health are affected by how communities are designed and managed. Lessons from the healthy communities field also validate the need for collaborative approaches, across sectors and including residents, that address the root causes of health disparities and strategically integrate multi-level supports. This means that solutions which rely solely on programs, promotions, and education are not enough. They must also be intentionally integrated with community-level environments, policies, and systemic supports that are designed for specific results—in this case, for meaningful social connection.

Although researchers and practitioners across the United States and the world are addressing social isolation, the field is fragmented and lacks a common framework or language. Currently, the most prevalent strategies to increase social connection include programming, education, and promotion of resources for people experiencing social isolation. For example, the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness and its sister organization, the Foundation for Social Connection, are providing national leadership around the integration of scientific research with solutions to address social isolation in health and social services sectors, promotion of school-level programming, and in federal policy and funding for national campaigns and resources.

These types of strategies are useful for quickly engaging organizations, increasing awareness of and commitments to address the crisis of social isolation, testing strategies, and providing immediate opportunities for people to connect with one another.

However, these efforts must also be integrated with strategies that address community-level root causes of social isolation in order to achieve long-term, sustainable change. That level of integration is nascent, at best.

This report is centered in a systems perspective, recognizing that people live in communities that comprise a set of institutions representing sectors, each with policies that drive decisions about investments in communities. Ideally, these sectors would be well connected and interdependent, each recognizing how their function contributes (or creates barriers) to health and well-being.

Instead, there are endless examples of how systems are intentionally designed to oppress and isolate people. Consider the examples on the following page. Now, imagine the level of distrust of government leaders that this history of disenfranchisement generates in residents. Creating a future where all people are valued and fully included in decision-making processes will require changes at community and systems levels that begin to reconcile these injustices.

This report focuses on how systems can be intentionally designed to support meaningful social connections. Providing a comprehensive list of recommendations for every community-level sector and system is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, the Social Isolation Learning Network focused on the intersections of housing, transportation, and public spaces as foundations for creating socially connected communities. Why these three? Housing is the center of our lives, an anchor point for our health. Stepping outside the home, we immediately encounter transportation networks and public spaces. These are the structures that enable access to all other sectors, like education, jobs, health care, and more. These realms are a promising starting point for addressing other sectors that impact social connectivity.

**Mutlisolving** is a term coined by Elizabeth Sawin, co-director of the think tank Climate Interactive, that describes the process of combining expertise, funding, and political will to solve multiple problems with a single, collaborative investment.

Recommendations within this report are intended to reframe the conversation and catalyze a set of **multisolvers** that can improve social connectivity for everyone. The recommendations incorporate the Guiding Concepts listed on pages 10–12 and vignettes from local leaders who have implemented some of the recommendations in their own communities.



# System Designs that Lead to Isolation and Oppression

## CULTURE

The U.S. was founded on the seizure of 1.5 billion acres of native land<sup>11</sup> and the intentional erasure of Native American culture through forced assimilation<sup>12</sup> into White culture.

## HOUSING

Public policies<sup>15</sup> such as redlining have created racially segregated neighborhoods, isolating minority students in poverty-concentrated schools and producing extreme wealth disparities.<sup>16</sup> The U.S. also passes laws that make homelessness and poverty a crime,<sup>17</sup> resulting in the forced removal of people from public spaces.

## JUSTICE

Over two million people, disproportionately Black and brown, are warehoused in cramped, unhealthy spaces that lack natural light, fresh air, healthy food, and which are far removed from their loved ones and communities. Formerly incarcerated people also experience significant barriers to opportunities such as education, housing, and jobs that have the potential to strengthen their social connections.

## EDUCATION

Students of color face racial bias in school discipline,<sup>13</sup> isolating them through disproportionate levels of suspension, expulsion, or removal from the classroom.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Approximately 19 million people in America have no access to fixed broadband service at functioning speeds.<sup>18</sup> Nearly one of every four people living in rural areas and nearly one in three living in tribal areas lack access. This digital divide exacerbates disparities related to education, jobs, and health care.<sup>19</sup>

## SAFETY

Fear of violence in neighborhoods isolates people from participation in civic processes, public spaces, and community programs. Safety concerns include gun violence, undocumented people fearing ICE raids, and people of color fearing over-policing and racially-motivated discrimination.

## HEALTH CARE

Racism, xenophobia, and transphobia, among other forms of oppression, drive disparities<sup>14</sup> in healthcare access and quality.

## PUBLIC SPACE

Buildings and public spaces are often inaccessible for people with disabilities, making their participation in public life difficult or impossible. Some public spaces display historical symbols which favor certain races and worldviews while omitting or offending others.

## TRANSPORTATION

Highway development intentionally split communities of color, resulting in a legacy of severed social networks and polluted neighborhoods. Other travel options (such as bicycles and buses) are stigmatized, and related investments often bypass low-income areas which would most benefit. Pedestrian fatality rates are also disproportionately racialized.<sup>20</sup>

A photograph of two women sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a white top and has a large pink and white flower in her hair. The woman on the right is wearing a patterned headscarf and a dark jacket. They are both smiling and looking towards each other. The background is a bright, sunlit outdoor area with greenery. The entire image has a warm, yellowish-green tint.

**Equitable public space sets the stage for interaction between different socioeconomic groups and can enhance tolerance and diversity cognition.**

American Planning Association  
*Planning for Equity Policy Guide*<sup>22</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 1

# Design, Maintain, and Activate Inclusive Public Spaces

Public spaces play many roles in communities, one of the foremost being the "welcome mat." Their designs, locations, aesthetics, and uses tell visitors and residents a lot about the values, culture, and identity of a place. Public spaces are an extension of communities and, when designed and managed well, offer places where residents can interact with each other and their government, experience cultural activities, access nature, and gain a sense of belonging.<sup>21</sup> The opportunities to promote health and strengthen social connection are endless in places such as parks, community gardens, greenways, streets, sidewalks, libraries, community centers, waterfronts, shared-use schoolyards, and the interstitial spaces around public buildings. Urban, suburban, and rural settings provide different, but equally powerful, opportunities to design inclusive public spaces.

As noted in the American Planning Association's *Planning for Equity Policy Guide*, "When equitable access is provided to all members of a community irrespective of physical abilities, age, gender, race, ethnicity, income level, or social status, public space promotes inclusion and improves equity. Equitable public space sets the stage for different socioeconomic groups to mix and interact and can enhance tolerance and diversity cognition."<sup>22</sup>

However, many marginalized people live in neighborhoods without access to safe, healthy, and welcoming environments. Inequities are often driven by historic and current policies, (dis)investment practices, and power structures in which community members are not represented by the people making decisions on their behalf. Furthermore, systemic racism and oppression that result in police violence against people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ people, and others means that design elements alone cannot create places where people can safely gather.

### GUIDING CONCEPT

#### Cultural & Historic Context

Recognize the history of public places, acknowledging the indigenous people from whom that land was stolen. Celebrate and welcome indigenous and other diverse populations. Learn more by exploring the Indigenous Land Acknowledgement listed in the Resources section of this report on page 45.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

##### Residents Build Local Trust

Additional community examples related to public spaces can be found on page 36-37.

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

##### Equity & Inclusion

Employ strategies to promote equity when investing in public spaces. This includes co-designing features that reflect local values, cultures, and needs, such as accommodations for all abilities and artworks that celebrate a community's diversity.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

##### Schools Transformed into Community Hubs

Additional community examples related to public spaces can be found on page 36-37.

#### RECOMMENDATION 1A

### Co-create inclusive, healthy public spaces.

Inclusion is both a process and an outcome, as described in Gehl Institute's *Guide to Inclusion and Health in Public Space*.<sup>23</sup> Inclusive public spaces welcome diverse community members who live nearby *and* include them in processes that promote civic trust and strengthen a sense of community. By co-creating public spaces in this way, social connection not only increases for those involved, but the resulting designs also bring together people who frequent these places.

#### RECOMMENDATION 1B

### Design safe places for all ages to gather.

Inter-generational programs and practices strategically connect people of all ages for mutually beneficial activities that contribute to greater social capital and more cohesive communities.<sup>24</sup> One way to support safe, all-ages gathering places is to co-locate services that support two or more generations. For example, co-locate adult and childcare centers, or senior centers within schools, or Head Start programs in nursing homes, and pair them with programs (like a group for older mothers mentoring younger mothers). Focusing on inter-generational connection is also a powerful way to bring together diverse races and cultures. Inclusive and welcoming public spaces can be activated by reviewing policies around permits and group sizes to ensure that multi-generational families and large cultural gatherings are supported, since some immigrant communities may have a broader definition of family, and thus larger gatherings, than many policies have been designed to allow.

Designing spaces for physical and psychological safety is also important. Engage experts in landscape architecture, urban and transportation planning, and other disciplines to design built and natural environments that help prevent crime and build a sense of community among residents. Prioritize strategies which employ a primary prevention frame centered on community safety as well as strategies that develop trust between community members and local government. This includes addressing law enforcement violence as a public health issue.<sup>25</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 1C

### Equitably maintain the quality of public spaces.

Equity and inclusion should drive maintenance decisions from the start. Planning for maintenance must begin before a public space is built or redesigned, and it is critical to include sufficient support for buildings, lighting, landscaping, and hardscaping into budgets. How public spaces are maintained—regardless of how well they are designed—can determine whether they support or hinder health and well-being. For example, a poorly maintained park, sidewalk, community center, or other public space can spark safety fears and reduce civic trust as residents feel ignored or abandoned by local leaders. Or consider how communities in colder climates benefit from snow removal and maintenance policies that prioritize access to public spaces and the ability to safely walk, cycle, and use transit throughout the year. With each of these maintenance decisions, there are creative opportunities to leverage multiple benefits and build in opportunities for social connectivity. For example, maintenance budgets could include paying youth for seasonal work.

## RECOMMENDATION 1D

### Activate public spaces to encourage healthy social interaction.

Unfortunately, some municipal bylaws and permitting processes are focused on risk and liability, and often create barriers for activation and engagement. To invite more social participation, develop policies that decriminalize "loitering," prohibit **hostile architecture**, and enable more innovative use of parks and public spaces. Additional examples of activation strategies are listed below.

- Increase access to recreation and socializing by adopting shared-use policies to open schoolyards during out-of-school hours.
- Allow fire pits during winter in public parks to encourage socializing. Invite people to adapt spaces with movable furniture and other features.<sup>22</sup>
- Eliminate policies that criminalize or facilitate disproportionate violence against specific populations.
- Increase access to public spaces through innovative programs, such as combining library passes with free entry to art, culture, and history institutions.
- Work with residents to determine how public spaces would best help them connect. In rural areas, for example, gathering places may be libraries, town halls, trailheads, playgrounds, or a beloved natural landmark.

## COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Park Advocacy Leads to Neighborhood Investments

Additional community examples related to public spaces can be found on page 36-37.

**Hostile architecture** refers to designs which intentionally discourage sitting or resting.



A photograph of three cyclists riding on a paved street in a residential neighborhood. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The cyclists are wearing helmets and casual riding attire. In the background, there are multi-story residential buildings and trees with autumn foliage. The overall mood is peaceful and active.

"We are slowly getting away from this narrow perception of streets as conduits for cars and beginning to think of streets as places."

Project for Public Spaces

Learn more at <https://www.pps.org/article/streets-as-places-how-transportation-can-create-a-sense-of-community>



## RECOMMENDATION 2

# Prioritize Connection in Transportation Systems

Safe, accessible, and affordable transportation options connect people to jobs, education, health care, child care, social services, and other critical resources that foster social connection and advance health. However, the United States' transportation system is designed to prioritize travel in personal vehicles through infrastructure investments and subsidies to fossil fuel companies. The result is that the majority of trips (87 percent), even for distances within walking or biking distance, occur in personal vehicles. Only two percent of all trips nationwide are transit trips.<sup>26</sup>

This creates significant barriers for those who are unable to drive, do not have or cannot obtain a driver's license, cannot afford a car, or fear discrimination during traffic stops, among other concerns. For example, nearly three times as many socially isolated rural adults with chronic health conditions or physical or cognitive limitations delayed seeking health care due to a lack of transportation.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the history of highway development shows a pattern of intentional dislocation and separation of communities of color, resulting in a legacy of severed social networks, polluted neighborhoods, and the stigmatization of active and public transportation options such as bicycles and buses. Furthermore, the burden of traffic deaths falls disproportionately on communities of color and older adults. For example, the pedestrian fatality rate for Native Americans is nearly five times higher than for White Americans, and the rate for African Americans is nearly twice as high.<sup>20</sup>

By prioritizing social connection and a sense of belonging, the transportation sector can reimagine ways to spark conversation, increase engagement, and improve health and well-being.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Community Change in a Bike Shop

Community examples related to transportation can be found on pages 37-38.

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

### Equity & Inclusion

In *Principles of Mobility Justice*, Untokening explains, "Mobility Justice demands that the lived experiences of community members be given priority as 'DATA' in assessing infrastructure and investment needs, while also accounting for the deep and lasting trauma from the erasure of social, cultural, and economic networks."

#### RECOMMENDATION 2A

### Think "people first."

Invest in public transportation, walking and bicycling networks, and appropriate supports (such as crosswalks, lower traffic speeds and volumes, air quality control, maintenance, and frequency of transit service) and ensure that these options are well connected to places people visit most often. These types of transportation modes can provide opportunities for meeting others, starting conversations, and building trust in neighbors and institutions. They also enhance individual and community resilience by supporting health and well-being for people and reducing the emissions driving climate change.

To avoid perpetuating existing oppression or inequitable investment, incorporate inclusive and just processes when designing "people-first" options. Care must also be taken to safeguard affordable housing (e.g., through rent control and mixed-income developments) when community improvements create conditions that increase market values and rent prices. Untokening's *Principles of Mobility Justice*<sup>28</sup> resource describes how bike lanes and green spaces often result in "environmental gentrification as longtime and lower-income residents are displaced by more affluent populations." Collectively building a multi-racial, multi-generational movement for mobility justice is a tool for stronger social connection in and of itself; and the outcome of that work leads to accessible, equitable transportation options that continue to bring people together.

#### RECOMMENDATION 2B

### Use policy levers to promote health and equity.

Transportation policy levers exemplify the comprehensive effect that transportation networks have on neighborhoods, communities, and their surrounding regions. Traditionally, transportation planners prioritized "vehicle level of service," or how quickly and efficiently cars could move on streets. There are many **alternative measurements** of transportation quality, especially related to health, equity, and public participation.<sup>29</sup> Policies about facilities maintenance are also an opportunity to promote health and equity. A process called "gender-balanced budgeting" in Sweden revealed how snow-clearing practices disadvantaged women, who

were more likely to walk. To address this, municipalities now clear walking and biking pathways, especially those near bus stops and primary schools, before clearing streets and highways.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, policy solutions can address issues of access that fall outside of the built environment. Increasing broadband access and telemedicine options can mitigate transportation-related barriers to social services and health care for people in rural areas, for example. Also consider driving licenses, which are a standard piece of identification that facilitate interactions with businesses, government agencies, and community institutions. They mitigate isolation by granting meaningful access to social institutions and enhancing a sense of safety and belonging. Policies can be updated to offer forms of identification that all residents (including children, people who are unable to drive, undocumented immigrants, and people experiencing homelessness or previous incarceration)<sup>31</sup> can access and which accurately reflect the gender of trans and non-binary people.

## RECOMMENDATION 2C

### Support elements that enhance public life.

Even though the transportation system is primarily focused on moving people, goods, and vehicles, its infrastructure offers programmatic opportunities to create pauses in movement that allow people to be active, think, and talk with others. For example, Safe Routes to School and walking school bus programs create greater social connection between schools, parents, and students<sup>32</sup> while also activating walk-friendly environments in neighborhoods and surrounding schools. Play streets—a temporary closure of public streets to create safe spaces for active play—offer youth and adults an opportunity to be active, meet neighbors, and build a sense of community. These strategies have been successfully implemented in both rural and urban areas.<sup>33</sup> In some communities, play streets double as summer food service sites.<sup>34</sup> Other activation strategies include Little Free Libraries at public bus stops, transforming trails into walkable art galleries, and working with community health workers to help people overcome transportation barriers to healthcare services. When designing programmatic supports such as these, consider existing assets, cultures, and histories through the lens of equity and inclusion.

## Alternative Measurements


*Healthy, Equitable Transportation Policy Recommendations and Research*, a publication by PolicyLink, Prevention Institute, and the Convergence Partnership, lists the following alternative transportation policies:

- Complete Streets
- Context Sensitive Design
- Environmental Review Toolkit
- Green Streets
- Health Impact Assessment (HIA)
- Livable Centers Initiative (LCI)
- Local Area Traffic Management (LATM)/Traffic Calming
- Road Diets

## COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Closing Streets to Invite Connection

Community examples related to transportation can be found on pages 37-38.



**Housing environments not only affect health and safety, but also create opportunities for connection with neighbors and community members.**

Health Affairs

*Housing and Health: An Overview of the Literature*<sup>35</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 3

# Construct Housing Environments that Build Community

Safe, affordable, stable, and healthy housing is a basic human need, and **housing environments** greatly influence health and well-being. It is essential to design communities so that they have a variety of housing options that meet these basic needs. Furthermore, the design of the surrounding neighborhood can enhance safety, provide access to resources such as healthy food and jobs, create opportunities to build relationships with neighbors, and strengthen an overall sense of community.<sup>35</sup>

Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, substandard housing is a critical issue in the U.S. and contributes to a vicious spiral of poverty and poor health. More than two million U.S. children<sup>36</sup> are homeless, and more are impacted by housing instability. Housing is a wealth-building tool, but historically oppressive policies and practices (such as redlining, predatory lending, and policies that enable land theft<sup>37</sup>) have made homeownership disproportionately difficult for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

Absentee landlords and housing discrimination further exacerbate negative conditions. In addition to disrupting employment, education, and continuity of services, unstable housing conditions also weaken social networks. The housing system is complex and must be addressed collaboratively with many goals in mind. These include affordability, equity, quality, stability, cultural sensitivity, environmental impacts, and social well-being.

**Housing environments** are the conditions related to housing structures and their surroundings.

### GUIDING CONCEPT

#### History & Culture

People feel a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to places that reflect their culture and values. Learn more by exploring *Happy Homes: A Toolkit for Building Sociability through Multi-family Housing Design* listed in the Resources section on page 45.

### GUIDING CONCEPT

#### Abundance Thinking & History

Support community conversations around the role of past practices and oppressive policies, like redlining, and implement equitable investments to help communities heal and restore trust in local leaders. To learn more, explore *Louisville, KY's Redlining Community Dialogue* listed in the Resources section of this report.



**Just cause** eviction policies support residential stability by limiting the reasons a landlord can evict tenants to causes such as nonpayment of rent, intentional damage to the unit, or other violations of terms within a rental lease.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Improving Living Conditions for Youth in Prison

Additional community examples related to housing can be found on page 38-39.

#### RECOMMENDATION 3A

### Strengthen and safeguard inclusive, affordable housing.

Policies can safeguard a plentiful supply of affordable, stable housing options. Examples of supportive housing policies include rent regulation and "**just cause**" eviction policies as well as property tax relief for income-qualified homeowners to prevent rising property taxes from displacing families.<sup>38</sup> Housing education and counseling for prospective buyers can be combined with ample affordable housing options and policies that provide financial supports for housing stability.

Finally, homelessness is a critical issue impacting more than a half million people on any given night, with BIPOC people more likely to experience homelessness than the national average and White people. Housing First is a strategy that addresses homelessness with a recovery-oriented approach that prioritizes helping people find permanent housing with wrap-around support, regardless of their age, identity, or history. Housing First is person-centered and client-driven: people direct their own path forward with agency support. This strategy also prioritizes social and community integration by using models that do not stigmatize or isolate people, but instead provide social and cultural engagement options, supported by employment and recreational activities.<sup>39</sup>



### RECOMMENDATION 3B

## Include spaces specifically designed for gatherings.

Community centers, green spaces, neighborhood parks, playgrounds, dog parks, and recreational options in housing developments draw people together. Work with local healthcare providers to use **social prescribing** to encourage people experiencing health needs, including social isolation, to use these community assets. Co-locate parks and affordable housing wherever possible. Ensure that parks are safe and welcoming to all—especially to people who are too often displaced or excluded. Outdoor gathering places become even more important when physical distancing is required due to health concerns.

### RECOMMENDATION 3C

## Zone to encourage diversity.

Mixed-income housing supports a spectrum of price points and creates a diverse community while reducing the stigma of "public housing." Mixed-use developments improve access to various services and resources, which reduces transportation-related challenges and typically increases street-level activity. Increased activity on streets improves safety and provides opportunities for spontaneous interaction with others. Include zoning ordinances that promote mixed housing with spaces for gathering and activities, along with proximity to healthy food, health care, places to be active, and more. Wide sidewalks with shaded trees and benches can improve access to nearby resources and encourage walking and socializing. Finally, ensure that housing serves people with differing abilities and cultural needs so that people with diverse life experiences can interact. Combined with other supports, this may also help reduce biases and stigmas.<sup>40</sup>

Health professionals use **social prescribing** as an alternative to traditional prescriptions to improve patients' health. Examples of social prescribing programs include Parkrx and Walk with a Doc.

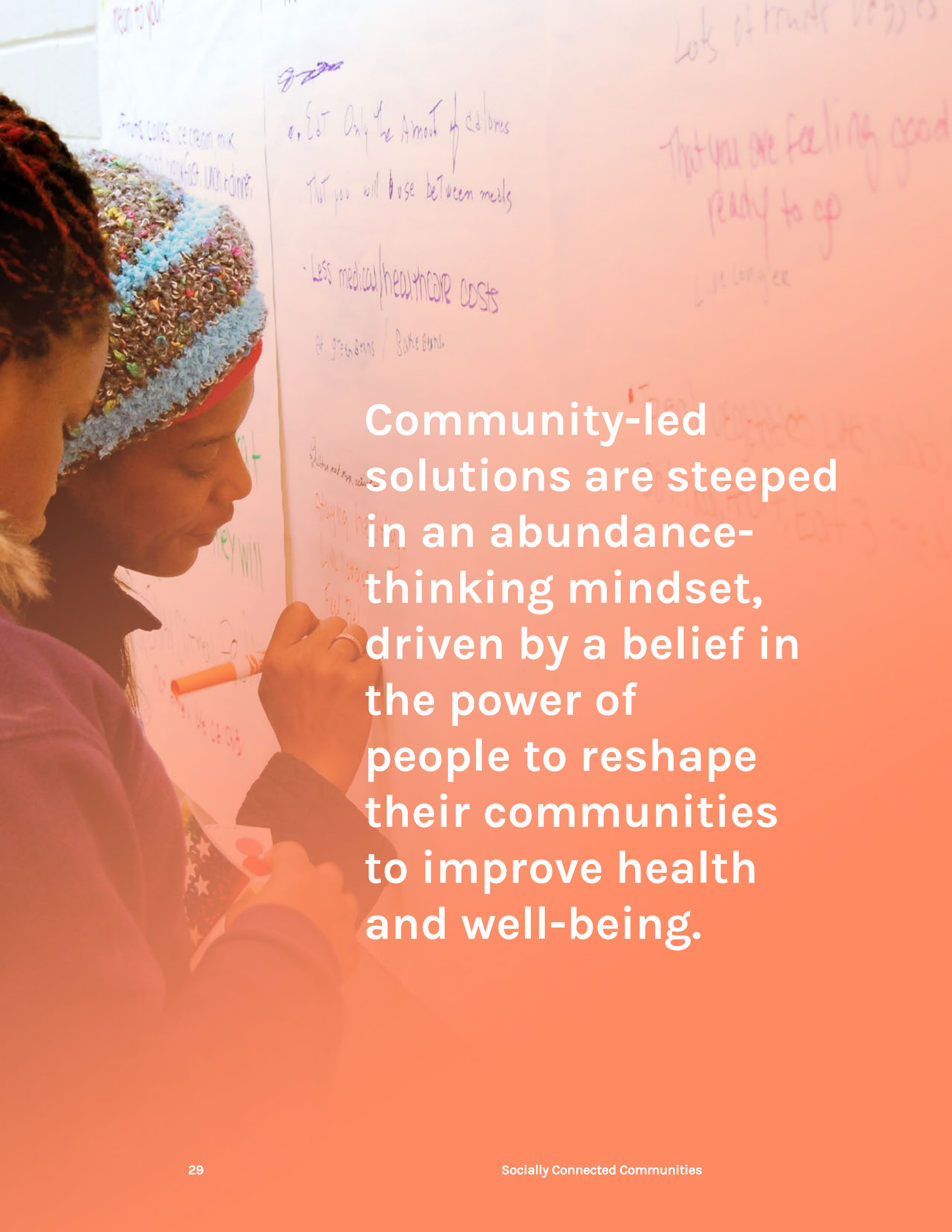
#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Connecting People through Mental Health and Housing Services

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Embedding Health Centers in Housing Developments

Additional community examples related to housing can be found on page 38-39.



**Community-led solutions are steeped in an abundance-thinking mindset, driven by a belief in the power of people to reshape their communities to improve health and well-being.**

**RECOMMENDATION 4**

# Invest in Inclusive Practices and Community-led Solutions

Too often, practices and procedures for designing places, programs, or policies do not include the people for whom those efforts are intended. This can result in solutions that don't align with community or cultural values and erode trust in government leaders. Local leaders who learn from and with residents (when support and safe space for sharing is offered) better understand what is and isn't working, and why. They welcome creative ideas from those most impacted by social systems.

Respecting culture, history, equity, and inclusion can help to (re) build trust between local leaders and residents. The engagement process itself can also bring together community members who wouldn't otherwise interact and forge stronger social connections for future civic engagement. Community-led solutions are steeped in an abundance thinking mindset, driven by a belief in the power of people to reshape their communities to improve health and well-being. Furthermore, local government leaders, philanthropic leaders, and others seeking to support community-led solutions must also be willing to cede power, celebrate and elevate diverse cultures, and harness creative communication channels.

**RECOMMENDATION 4A**

## Shift power to community members.

Respect community members' agency by providing them with the flexibility, freedom, and resources to develop the solutions they feel best meet their needs. Investing in meaningful community engagement not only results in more inclusive and welcoming solutions (because people see themselves in the outcome), but participation itself also increases a sense of belonging and can inspire other community members to engage in collaborative efforts.<sup>41</sup>

**GUIDING CONCEPT**

### Equity & Inclusion

Language is a primary tool for connecting with others and sharing ideas and experiences. It can also be a tool of oppression. Language justice incorporates practices that enable everyone to communicate in the language they prefer. Multi-lingual spaces better help people communicate, learn, and strategize together. Learn more by exploring the *Communities Creating Healthy Environments' Language Justice Toolkit* listed in the Resources section of this report on page 45.

**COMMUNITY EXAMPLE**

### Volunteer-led Community Projects

Additional examples related to inclusive practices can be found on pages 39-40.

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

### Abundance Thinking & Inclusion

An inclusive school curriculum can foster pride and visibility of LGBTQ people and other marginalized people by celebrating their contribution to history and counterbalancing the stereotypes, erasure, and exclusion that can make school environments and public spaces unsafe. Learn more by exploring *Erasure and Resilience: The Experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color* listed in the Resources section of this report.

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

### Abundance Thinking & Culture

Map the artistic and cultural assets of cities, towns, states, tribal communities, and the nation, with a focus on the cultural resources in communities of color and low-income communities. Learn more on page 7 of *Creating Change through Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development*.<sup>45</sup>

**Cultural enclaves** are safe spaces where people with shared identities and/or languages can gather.

To foster more inclusive participation, seek out and invest in local groups such as block clubs, neighborhood associations, parent groups, and faith-based communities. Incorporate practices and policies that increase opportunities for participation, such as bringing conversations to places people already frequent and during times they will already be there, as well as providing child care, transportation, and meals. Use transparent and inclusive decision-making practices, such as community participatory budgeting approaches that incorporate resident input into funding decisions in jurisdictions at all levels. Work with grassroots and nonprofit organizations that have already built trust with community members, especially with those who are typically excluded from community-development processes.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4B

### Elevate practices rooted in culture.

Imagine the opportunities for social connectivity when public spaces, transportation networks, and neighborhood gathering places are co-created with (and therefore reflect) the diverse experiences, history, and culture of everyone who lives nearby.

As noted in the introduction to *Creating Change through Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development*,<sup>42</sup> "Arts and culture are essential for building community, supporting development, nurturing health and well-being, and contributing to economic opportunity. Collectively, arts and culture enable understanding of the past and envisioning of a shared, more equitable future. In disinvested communities, arts and culture act as tools for community development, shaping infrastructure, transportation, access to healthy food, and other core amenities. In communities of color and low-income communities, arts and culture contribute to strengthening cultural identity, healing trauma, and fostering shared vision for community."

Culturally-relevant, gender-inclusive practices that celebrate cultural assets are instrumental for navigating systems of oppression and improving access to health and social services. Practices that are rooted in culture can incorporate a sense of celebration, help residents learn about other cultures, and practice cultural humility. **Cultural enclaves** are also important for generating social support for marginalized groups such as new Americans.

Safe spaces help promote empowerment, civic engagement, and community mobilization against stigma, discrimination, and violence.<sup>43</sup> The result is a welcoming place that says, "We see you, we hear you, and you belong here."

#### RECOMMENDATION 4C

### Harness creative communication channels.

Staying socially connected is still possible even when being together in person is difficult, like during a pandemic. Using social media and video platforms to expand conversations and networks can benefit individuals and advance community-led change. Harness these channels to reframe the conversation around root causes rather than on individuals, and around a desired future (socially connected communities), rather than the problem at hand (social isolation). Exchanging stories connects people through empathy, and builds trust and rapport between previously disconnected groups. Provide resources and opportunities for people to tell stories about the issues that matter to them in their own words. Think broadly about the communication channels available for connecting residents to each other and specific resources. Ask residents what help they need to better access resources and opportunities for engagement.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4D

### Create universal broadband access.

COVID-19 exposed the critical need for—and the disparities related to—broadband access. The ability to connect to others virtually is not only important for socializing, but also for accessing critical services such as telemedicine. At least 19 million people lack basic internet access, including 25 percent of people living in rural areas, one-third of people living in tribal areas, and many low-income families. Public-private partnerships are addressing this need through a variety of innovative and community-based solutions. One solution is to install Wi-Fi "Super Spots" in areas of highest need, such as libraries, schools, public housing sites, community centers, and other community hubs. For example, one city library in San Jose, California is making 3,000 hotspots available for 90-day check-out periods. Another 8,000 will be provided to students who need broadband connectivity.<sup>44</sup>

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Volunteer-led Community Projects

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Monthly Mothers' Meetings

Additional examples related to inclusive practices can be found on pages 39-40.





By consistently and intentionally weaving social well-being into policy priority areas, local leaders can strengthen the social fabric of their communities and our country.



## RECOMMENDATION 5

# Make Social Connectedness a Community Norm

As noted previously, every aspect of community life can either enhance or suppress social well-being. All sectors have a role to play, and their efforts become more effective when social connectedness is a community-wide priority and norm. When community leaders pair a Social in All Policies framework with approaches that are trauma- and resilience-informed, they demonstrate what their community values: people. Such efforts help improve trust between residents and leaders and open the door for conversations about co-creating a shared vision for a future where everyone experiences absolute belonging and social well-being.

### RECOMMENDATION 5A

#### Use a Social in All Policies framework.

Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Director of the Social Connections and Health Research Laboratory at Brigham Young University, writes, "Social well-being is influenced by all sectors of society, including health, transportation, housing, employment, education, food and nutrition, and environment." She suggests adopting a **Social in All Policies** framework to guide the efforts of diverse sectors.<sup>45</sup>

Such an approach can teach local leaders how to position social connectivity as a foundational element of health and would be especially powerful paired with approaches that address injustice or trauma. Community-level policies reflect values, establish priorities, and influence the practices of systems leaders. Policies also earmark funding and resources. Policies at the local, state, and federal level shape community conditions and are potential levers of change to advance health and strengthen social connections. By consistently weaving social well-being into policy priority areas, local leaders can strengthen the social fabric of their communities and our country.

**Social in All Policies** is a concept which elaborates on Health in All Policies, a World Health Organization framework that advocates for incorporating health considerations into decision-making across all sectors and policy areas.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

##### A Model of Regional Collaboration

An additional community example related to community norms can be found on page 41.

#### COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

### Trauma-Informed Gathering Space

An additional community example related to community norms can be found on page 41.

#### RECOMMENDATION 5B

### Implement trauma- and resilience-informed practices.

Even with a Social in All Policies framework, care must be taken to reduce trauma and increase resilience. Some people self-isolate because of violence in their neighborhood or because the social connections they would make while participating in community life would be toxic to their health. A community group in West Baltimore uses the term "situational isolation" to describe the avoidance of social settings and built environments that contribute to traumatic experiences.<sup>46</sup> To address situational isolation, trauma- and resilience-informed policies can be implemented within systems such as housing, justice, immigration, and others that intentionally and unintentionally exacerbate isolation.

Examples include designating accessible, free public spaces like libraries as safe places for vulnerable groups; offering programs to increase acceptance of these groups in order to mitigate social exclusion;<sup>47</sup> maintaining gender-neutral bathrooms to foster a sense of safety and inclusivity for sexual- and gender-minority youth;<sup>48</sup> and BRIDGE Housing's Trauma Informed Community Building Model (listed in the Resources section of this report).

#### RECOMMENDATION 5C

### Declare community values.

Community values are formally and informally declared. The design of public infrastructure, policies that impact the availability and affordability of basic needs, and practices of inclusion or exclusion speak volumes about what drives investment decisions and who is valued. Community leaders can and should work *with* residents (rather than merely *for* them) to declare their community as one that values all people, prioritizes dignity, honors diverse identities and cultures, and demonstrates compassion.

Examples can be found across the U.S. and globally, as cities have declared themselves compassionate<sup>49</sup> or welcoming communities<sup>50</sup> (including sanctuary cities), resilient communities (which are socially connected), and stigma-free zones.<sup>51</sup> What might we call a community where all people experience a sense of belonging with strong social connections?

#### GUIDING CONCEPT

### Culture & History

A community's history and culture may strongly affect its values. Avoid declaring community values solely as a branding effort or for political benefit. Community conversations about values should include how residents want their community to show up for them and for visitors alike, and ensure that their values are demonstrated in leaders' commitments and actions.

# Community Examples



## PUBLIC SPACES

### Residents Build Local Trust

The Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative, supported by the New York State Health Foundation, is a resident-led, nonprofit organization advancing equity, health, and social connection. While Niagara Falls draws tourism that economically benefits the city, working-class neighborhoods suffer from long-term disinvestment and high levels of poverty. This creates mistrust of government and other institutions. The Collaborative is rebuilding trust and capacity by supporting community members to create the positive changes they desire. For example, the weekly Mile n' Smile walking club invites people to exercise and socialize in diverse public spaces, some previously inaccessible to residents. Partners such as the Buffalo Niagara Water Keepers and Niagara Falls National Heritage Area have shared critical historical and environmental stories during the walks. The Collaborative has supported community gardens, park improvements, converting an abandoned house into a youth clubhouse, and partnering with schools and city agencies to install little libraries near schools and parks. These residents have helped create a healthier Niagara Falls by building trust and social connection as necessary ingredients for well-being.

Learn more at [www.healthierniagarafalls.org](http://www.healthierniagarafalls.org)



## PUBLIC SPACES

### Schools Transformed into Community Hubs

In the Mat-Su Valley of Alaska, Youth 360 uses public schools and spaces to provide after-school programming and social connection opportunities for middle and high school students. The project is based on the Icelandic Prevention Model, which holds that social connectedness and access to activities can reduce youth drug and alcohol use and strengthen wider communities. In sparsely populated areas, Youth 360 has increased access to transportation, public spaces, and communication channels for marginalized families and communities. Free after-school programs and bus routes connect students to activities and a range of peers. Local school personnel identify isolated families and drive outreach and engagement efforts. In turn, youth provide input for program activities and community-level solutions for supporting young people. Youth 360 has also increased access to behavioral and mental health resources. By leveraging public schools as natural gathering places, collecting information about community needs and challenges, and increasing access to community-based activities, Youth 360 has decreased social isolation among participants and increased local capacity to address it.

Learn more at [www.youth-360.org](http://www.youth-360.org)



## PUBLIC SPACES

### Park Advocacy Leads to Neighborhood Investments

The Community-Centered Health (CCH) initiative was developed in 2014 by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation to support collaboration between health clinics and community organizations. Rather than an individual-centered and treatment-oriented lens, this approach was community-centered and prevention-oriented. Decision makers at every level (from local leaders to funders) ensured that community residents could prioritize specific issues and solutions. While partners' data and experiences informed conversations, the project's focus was determined by the people most impacted by health disparities. For example, residents from a historically African-American neighborhood in Gastonia, NC shared with CCH partners how it felt to live near the only neighborhood park in the city that didn't have outdoor restrooms—which residents had been requesting for over fifty years. Their advocacy, and continued work with partners, resulted in the City of Gastonia investing over \$2 million in the Highland community to build new affordable homes, high-visibility crosswalks, a children's splash park, improved street lights, and—finally—outdoor restrooms in the park.

Learn more at <https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/shifting-power-to-patients/>



## TRANSPORTATION

### Community Change in a Bike Shop

A bike shop in Kalihi Valley, Hawaii, has become an important venue for promoting local health and social well-being. At the Kalihi Valley Instructional Bike Exchange (KVIBE), young men and boys of color regularly gather to learn bike repair skills. They also use the shop as a safe space to heal, connect, share cultural pride, and develop their skills as social change leaders. Concepts of mobility and advocacy for bike lanes and bike share programs have helped them transform their community. For example, youth leaders prevented a two-lane street near the bike shop from becoming a four-lane road, which would have cut through the community. Their advocacy helped preserve local culture and the community's safety, while also allowing them to strengthen social connections within and beyond their group.

Learn more at <https://makingconnections.movemberprojects.com/projects/honolulu-hi/>

## TRANSPORTATION

### Closing Streets to Invite Connection

Ciclovía Recreativa is a program which closes streets to cars to create safe and inclusive spaces for people to be active outdoors. The program has been implemented in four Latin American cities (Bogotá, Mexico City, Santiago de Cali, and Santiago de Chile), and has demonstrated that it can improve inclusion in highly unequal and segregated urban environments.<sup>52</sup> In addition to providing space for health-enhancing physical activity, the Ciclovía program brings together people from different neighborhoods, including diverse socioeconomic groups. As people share public space, they have opportunities to build social capital and cohesion.

## HOUSING

### Connecting People through Mental Health and Housing Services

The Connecting People model uses an abundance-thinking mindset to improve the quality of life for mental health service users. The model increases the strength and diversity of social networks and connections, cuts through system barriers and stigma, and helps service users understand how they have been oppressed by systems. Jewish Family Service (JFS) of Atlantic & Cape May Counties in New Jersey first adopted this model for people who have experienced incarceration, and JFS is now expanding its use with others. There have been positive outcomes across the board. For example, after JFS helped a man named Stephen find an affordable home, he was able to recognize that being connected to others helped him stay sober and gave him a sense of purpose. He began volunteering to help older adults in the community, joined a church, made new friends, and has access to transportation. These additions to Stephen's social network not only improved his quality of life, but also the lives of others.

Learn more at [www.connectingpeople.net](http://www.connectingpeople.net) and [www.jfsatlantic.org](http://www.jfsatlantic.org)



## HOUSING

### Improving Living Conditions for Youth in Prison

During a critical stage of life, young people in prison are exposed to harmful environments where fear and isolation are the norm, and where they are disconnected from their families and support networks. To improve conditions, Restoring Promise creates alternative housing units for young adults in prison which are grounded in dignity and transform the culture, climate, rhythms, and routines that define the prison system. Designs are driven by incarcerated people and corrections staff, empowering those most impacted by the system to create the changes they know are needed. Restoring Promise's approach is anti-racist, values-based, and transforms correctional culture through training, presentations, workshops, and healing circles—setting a new tone for the entire system. Its model disrupts harmful practices and policies within prison systems; confronts how historical racism manifests in prisons; and repairs harm for people living and working in prison, as well as their families and communities.

Learn more at <https://restoringpromise.vera.org/>  
Photo credit Lilly Holzer





## HOUSING

### Embedding Health Centers in Housing Developments

In Richmond, Virginia, a 2017 RWJF Culture of Health Prize winner, the Richmond City Health District (RCHD) mapped the prevalence of various poor health indicators such as infant mortality, chronic disease, and substance abuse. RCHD found a strong link to public housing. In response, it partnered with the city's redevelopment and housing authority to embed health resource centers in the largest public housing developments. The centers are staffed with community health workers who have lived in public housing and are able to build trusting relationships with residents. Community health workers connect people to specific resources, like counseling and employment services, and to each other. RCHD also began addressing the design of housing and neighborhoods so that when public housing developments are replaced or redesigned, the supply of public housing is not diminished, and families are paired with a "family transition coach" if relocation is necessary. These coaches work with families for at least one year to help them achieve employment, financial management, and other goals.

Learn more at <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/features/culture-of-health-prize/2017-winner-richmond-virginia.html>



## INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

### Volunteer-led Community Projects

As part of Wintermission Buffalo in New York, block clubs in eligible, low- to moderate-income neighborhoods received mini grants for volunteer-led approaches that improved quality of life during the winter. For example, applicants were asked to "create a team of young people who commit to shoveling at least three blocks of a local sidewalk, preferably close to an amenity like a community center, within 24 hours of every storm." Such collaborative efforts led to social connections among team members and also made it possible for residents to stay more engaged in their communities when weather would have otherwise kept them indoors.

Learn more at [www.880cities.org/portfolio\\_page/wintermission/buffalo](http://www.880cities.org/portfolio_page/wintermission/buffalo)





### INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

## Empowered Youth Tell Their Own Stories

The ENLACE (Engaging the Next Latinx Allies for Change and Equity) program partners with Outside the Frame to help LGBTQ youth tell their own stories of strength in the face of oppression and marginalization. For example, 18-year-old Nat, who uses they/them pronouns, has a physical disability, severe social anxiety, and bipolar disorder. After taking the filmmaking workshop, Nat created a telenovela to share advice with other youth and parents about mis-gendering and racism. Nat uses a telenovela to tell their mom, "I need you to support me; I need you to respect my pronouns. Every time you call me a girl, I feel angry, hurt, and invisible... It's hard enough dealing with people outside of this house, but coming home and still not feeling safe and accepted—it's too much." Nat was able to transform their experiences with social isolation, fear, oppression, and disability into sources of strength. Paired with an Outreach Leadership Institute curriculum, these stories can be transformative tools for increasing social connection and reducing bullying and discrimination.

Learn more about ENLACE at <https://synergies.oregonstate.edu/2019/enlace-program/> Outside the Frame at [www.outsidetheframe.org](http://www.outsidetheframe.org) and Outreach Leadership Institute at <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/4h/outreach-leadership-institute>

### INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

## Monthly Mothers' Meetings

In the Belong to Baltimore study, African-American mothers of children ages 0-5 from West Baltimore, Maryland, gather monthly (shifting to virtual meetings during COVID) to connect with others who have similar experiences. Mothers set goals for their families, and the time together helps them understand that they are not alone on their journey. The study's organizers help the mothers measure their social networks, expand their levels of support, and connect them with the resources and services they need to meet their goals. By implementing this safe space for people with shared experiences, the study is helping mothers build trusting relationships while advancing the science of social isolation by actively listening to community members about what is respectful, acceptable, and valuable when building social connectedness in marginalized communities.

Learn more at [@belongtobaltimore](https://www.instagram.com/belongtobaltimore) on Instagram



## COMMUNITY NORMS

### A Model of Regional Collaboration

The Danville Regional Foundation (DRF) supports The Health Collaborative (THC), a group of passionate, multi-sector community leaders committed to improving health by addressing health equity, strategic planning, and collaboration across the Dan River Region. DRF supports THC's work through trainings such as the Racial Equity Institute's Undoing Racism, as well as site visits which allow THC members to learn from other communities. As a result of these investments, leaders at a local healthcare management organization changed their hiring policies to decrease the influence of implicit bias. And during a 2019 site visit to New Orleans, LA, THC members learned how a local community was embedding equity into its programs, policies, and decision-making processes. Members returned to the Danville region with ideas about creating stronger and more active marketing and communication networks and opportunities for formal leadership and equity training. DRF and THC have begun extending invitations for similar training opportunities to broader networks within the community in order to build capacity across the region.

Learn more at [www.drfonline.org](http://www.drfonline.org)



## COMMUNITY NORMS

### Trauma-Informed Gathering Space

Returning to civilian life after serving in the military is never easy. Student veterans at Kankakee Community College in Illinois carefully designed a veterans' resource center on campus to foster connections among veterans. Student veterans use the resource center to plan events and activities, such as an ongoing PhotoVoice project. Recognizing the hyper-vigilance veterans often experience, one trauma-informed design decision enhanced a sense of safety by ensuring that nobody would have their back to the door. As a result of the intentional programming and design, student veterans feel more connected to each other, have a sense of purpose, are more engaged in their community, and are able to participate in more personal and educational development opportunities.

Learn more at [www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=tG5J5SZe\\_vA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=tG5J5SZe_vA)

# Conclusion

A healthy community enables *all* of its residents to experience complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Local and philanthropic leaders who strive to create resilient, equitable, and healthy communities know they must address the quality, safety, and affordability of education, food, health care, housing, recreation, and transportation, as well as access to jobs and clean air and water. To date, social connection has not been included as an explicit and integrated priority in efforts to improve community health, despite its vital contribution to that end. It's time to address it with intentional, systems-wide strategies so that all people can experience the benefits of socially connected communities.

## Future Considerations

The areas represented in this report—housing, transportation, public spaces, inclusive and community-led solutions, and community norms—are starting points intended to catalyze broader and deeper conversations about, and commitments to, creating socially connected communities. Just as the areas covered in this report offer ample opportunities for addressing social connectivity, other sectors are critically important to population health and well-being.

For example, the food system impacts all aspects of communities, and is uniquely positioned to enhance social connectivity and well-being. Furthermore, this can be done in ways that support local farmers (especially farmers of color who have experienced decades of government-sanctioned discrimination<sup>53</sup>) by fostering relationships between residents and farmers, rebuilding trust between government leaders and residents, and creating a greater understanding of the need for social connection.

Another example that affects all communities is the changing climate. Every major climate change report has indicated that climate-related global migrations will increase, especially for the most vulnerable. At local levels, families across the country are newly homeless, some losing their entire community, because of fires and floods. Local government leaders, philanthropies, and partnering organizations must proactively design policies, environments, and programs to help displaced families find community again.

Troubling trends such as rising unemployment rates, discrimination against new immigrants, and increasing resistance toward social justice will also negatively impact social well-being. The Social Isolation Learning Network encourages a continuous integration of social health into all efforts to create healthy communities.

## Everyone Has a Role

Fortunately, strategies for creating socially connected communities are multisolver solutions and can be integrated into every sector that affects health. We encourage readers to identify the role that they can play in advancing social connectivity. For example:

- **Architects** and **planners** can design inclusive, healthy spaces with residents and intentionally program them for social interaction.
- **Community-based organizations, religious groups,** and **social service providers** can devise programs that encourage socializing and include needed supports—from transportation to coaching—to help people participate.
- **Educators** and **schools** can adopt an inclusive curriculum, teach students social and emotional skills, promote shared-use facilities, and ensure safe routes to school.
- **Health providers** can ask about patients' social connections during visits, and then work with them to develop practical solutions, including social prescribing and collaborating with community partners.

- **Local government leaders** and **policy makers**, including housing and transportation leaders, can weave social connectedness and community-centered processes into every policy, practice, development, and investment that they influence.
- **Philanthropy** can complement all of these efforts with targeted community-level investments, facilitation and convening supports, as well as by providing resources for research, development, communications, and community advocacy around social connectedness.

Imagine, again, a socially connected community where people know and trust their neighbors and people from different neighborhoods. Where people with diverse identities and experiences are civically engaged. Where people are connected to each other and to important services, resources, and inclusive spaces. Where everyone feels represented and welcomed in their community.

Now, more than ever, local leaders and residents must create more socially connected, resilient, and equitable communities where everyone has the support they need to thrive. Through unity and connectedness, the opportunities are endless. Together, let's make this vision a reality.

# Resources

## Planning for Equity Policy Guide

[https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/publication/download\\_pdf/Planning-for-Equity-Policy-Guide-rev.pdf](https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/publication/download_pdf/Planning-for-Equity-Policy-Guide-rev.pdf)

## Community Redlining Dialogue

<https://louisvilleky.gov/government/redevelopment-strategies/redlining-community-dialogue>

## Connecting IRL: How the Built Environment Can Foster Social Health

<https://admin.hksinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HKS-LonelinessBuiltEnvironment-Peavey-2020.pdf>

## Creating Change through Arts, Culture, and Equitable Development

[www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/report\\_arts\\_culture\\_equitable\\_development.pdf](http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/report_arts_culture_equitable_development.pdf)

## Creating the Healthiest Nation: Health and Housing Equity

[www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/equity/health\\_and\\_housing\\_equity.ashx](http://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/topics/equity/health_and_housing_equity.ashx)

## Equity and Public Space, from Reimagining the Civic Commons

<https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/equity-and-public-space-c376697fd31>

## Erasure and Resilience: The Experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color

[www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Erasure-and-Resilience-Latinx-2020.pdf](http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Erasure-and-Resilience-Latinx-2020.pdf)

## Happy Homes: A Toolkit for Building Sociability through Multi-family Housing Design

[www.thehappycity.com/resources/happy-homes/](http://www.thehappycity.com/resources/happy-homes/)

## Inclusive Healthy Places—A Guide to Inclusion & Health in Public Space: Learning Globally to Locally

[https://gehl.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Inclusive-Healthy-Places\\_Gehl-Institute.pdf](https://gehl.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Inclusive-Healthy-Places_Gehl-Institute.pdf)

## Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

<https://nativegov.org/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment/>

## Loneliness and Social Isolation in the US, the UK and Japan: An International Survey

[www.kff.org/other/report/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey/](http://www.kff.org/other/report/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey/)

## Partnering to Enable Active Rural Living: Pearl Project

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1442&context=jrjss>

## Plan H: Social Connectedness

[https://planh.ca/sites/default/files/tools-resources/socialconnectedness\\_ag\\_v2\\_1\\_web.pdf](https://planh.ca/sites/default/files/tools-resources/socialconnectedness_ag_v2_1_web.pdf)

## The Planner's Playbook: A Community-Centered Approach to Improving Health and Equity

[www.changelabsolutions.org/product/planners-playbook](http://www.changelabsolutions.org/product/planners-playbook)

## Policy Objective: Increasing Housing Stability for Renters and Owners

<https://www.localhousingolutions.org/act/policy-objectives/>

## Public Libraries: A Community-Level Resource to Advance Population Health

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6329675/>

## Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework

[www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/safe-routes-action-framework.pdf](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/safe-routes-action-framework.pdf)

## Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness

[www.socialconnectedness.org](http://www.socialconnectedness.org)

## The Relationship-Centered City

[https://shiftdesign.org/content/uploads/2020/03/The-Relationship-Centred-City\\_March2020\\_Web-small.pdf](https://shiftdesign.org/content/uploads/2020/03/The-Relationship-Centred-City_March2020_Web-small.pdf)

## The Role of Architecture in Fighting COVID-19

[https://massdesigngroup.org/sites/default/files/multiple-file/2020-05/Carceral%20Environments%20and%20COVID-19\\_0.pdf](https://massdesigngroup.org/sites/default/files/multiple-file/2020-05/Carceral%20Environments%20and%20COVID-19_0.pdf)

## The Role of Transportation in Addressing Social Isolation in Older Adults

[https://nationalcenterformobilitymanagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL\\_FULL\\_SOCIAL-ISOLATION-RESEARCH-PAPER.pdf](https://nationalcenterformobilitymanagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL_FULL_SOCIAL-ISOLATION-RESEARCH-PAPER.pdf)

## Trauma-Informed Community Building

<https://bridgehousing.com/PDFs/TICB.Paper5.14.pdf>

## Untethered: A Primer on Social Isolation

[www.readuntethered.com](http://www.readuntethered.com)

## Why We Need Park Equity

[www.preventioninstitute.org/blog/why-we-need-park-equity](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/blog/why-we-need-park-equity)



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