



# Policy Brief

## Fostering Social Connection Through the Built Environment: Considerations for Research, Policy, and Practice

**Social connection:** an umbrella term encompassing the structure, function, and quality of social relationships; it is a multifactorial, cultural construct that lies on a continuum from risk when social connection is low, to protection, when social connection is high.

**Social isolation:** an objective and structural indicator of low social connection characterized by few social relationships, roles, and infrequent social contact.

**Loneliness:** a subjective indicator of perceived isolation characterized by distressing feelings of aloneness or isolation from others, representing the discrepancy between one's actual and desired level of connection.

**Built environment:** the human-made infrastructure that comprises our neighborhoods, towns, and cities, such as parks, buildings, streets, bridges, sidewalks, and transportation systems.

**The public realm:** any publicly available space that is free and accessible to everyone, such as streets and public parks.

### Why Does This Matter?

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced how vital **social connection** is for healthy and thriving individuals and communities. Lacking [social connection](#) has been linked to a multitude of physical and mental health outcomes, including greater risk for mortality and morbidity. In fact, it carries a risk that is comparable to, and in many instances, [greater than](#) other widely documented risk factors such as smoking and obesity. Given the magnitude of risk, there is growing awareness and urgency to consider and address social connection as a [social determinant of health](#) at all levels. Multiple components of the **built environment** can influence social connection throughout one's life. The built environment can impact social connection at the individual-level (e.g., personal connections, interpersonal interactions) and at the ecological or neighborhood-level (e.g., neighborhood and community ties, societal implications). Thus, it is crucial to consider the role of the built environment in shaping social connection through micro- to macro-level processes, as well as how it can be used as a vessel for change. This will require intentional planning of the **public realm** we navigate, as well as interdisciplinary, coordinated action that bridges research, policy and practice to promote socially connected communities where all individuals can thrive.

### Implications

To foster the built environment as a vessel for social connection, which is critical for healthy and thriving communities, the following implications ought to be considered in research, policy, and practice:

#### Implications for Research:

- Use a multidimensional and standardized approach to defining and measuring social connection (at both individual and community levels) that considers the structural, functional, and qualitative domains in combination. While there is [research](#) aimed at understanding and comparing the effects of social connection on health globally, there is variability in how it is measured across disciplines.

- Measure, track and actively design for social connection [at multiple levels](#) and across sectors and disciplines.
- Engage collaboratively with groups who have been historically marginalized, such as people with physical and/or psychological disabilities.
- Investigate best practices in the built environment that promote and contribute to social connection.
- Include social connection within Social Determinants of Health and other national health objectives. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes [psychosocial circumstances](#) (e.g., social relationships and support) as a social determinant of health and *Healthy People 2030* now lists '[social and community context](#)' as a social determinant of health with a description that aligns with how we conceptualize social connection. However, neither of these explicitly target social connection in their objectives.

## Implications for Policymakers:

- Create guidelines and incentives for all levels of government to embed social connection into their planning processes and outcomes.
- Each level of government should:
  - Consider social connection in objectives, goals, and strategies in official government plans, community plans and regional growth plans.
  - Create land development and mixed-use zoning policies that promote social connection.
  - Support community programs, initiatives and residents in implementation and applications, offer facilities and funding for programs that encourage social connection.
  - Monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes and share findings among stakeholders to develop complementary policies.
  - Develop partnerships and work closely with communities, organizations, schools, non-profits, health/public health sectors, developers, firms and residents to inform decisions about the built environment. Examples of governmental strategies for addressing social connection include the U.K.'s [2018 Commission on Loneliness](#).
- Ensure revitalization initiatives are inclusive of all residents and prevent [the displacement of local residents](#) due to higher cost of living.
- Employ a health equity perspective across policies to ensure that the built environment across neighborhoods is accessible, of good quality and meets the needs of the people. Center the experiences of those who are most marginalized.
- Fund cross-cultural adaptations within and across communities and subpopulations as built environment solutions and interventions are generated.

## Implications for Planning and Practice:

- Implement evidence-informed strategies in planning and design at different scales, taking a socio-ecological perspective (and build on these best practices).
  - Within residential units, ensure buildings, townhomes, and condominiums have common areas and spaces to gather and promote community connections. Include [microscale features](#) such as benches, picnic shelters, etc.
  - Within neighborhoods, create high-quality open space and accessible community amenities to foster community interactions and connectedness. This is vital within urban centres, but also within suburban and more rural settings.
  - Within cities and towns, [design streets](#) to promote community engagement. Embed placemaking strategies, age-friendly features, active transportation infrastructure and mixed-use developments.
- Engage in meaningful and ongoing collaboration with communities that is not tokenistic. Consider the demographics of the community (e.g., Indigenous communities, communities of color, people living with disabilities, children, youth, older adults, etc.) in planning culturally safe and relevant engagement opportunities.

## Bridging Research, Practice, and Policy:

- Use the same language and develop a universal definition for "social connection" across different fields to ensure that monitoring and evaluation is comparable between research, policy and practice.

- Break down silos through interdisciplinary work. Fields such as public health, psychology, sociology, environmental studies, architecture, planning and geography all have contributions to make to designing socially connected built environments.
- Evaluate and monitor built environment changes, interventions, and their impacts on social connection through community-engaged, [high-quality, pre-post studies](#).
- Embed an [equity lens in designing](#) built environments and promote equity-based [placemaking](#).
- Commit to a long-term vision that is built over generations intentionally with both short- and long-term goals (e.g. [social prescribing](#) and supports in the short-term alongside long-term plans for future developments for urban, rural and regional planning).
- Collaborate to create resilient built environments that can withstand current and future environmental and health crises.
- Ensure existing frameworks and objectives, such as [Healthy People 2030](#), clearly establish and address the connection between the built environment and social connection.

## Facts at a Glance

- In a meta-analytic review of 148 studies, stronger social connection was associated with a [50%](#) decrease in mortality risk.
- Publicly accessible greenspace within [500 meters](#) (546 yards) of residences is related to a greater sense of community belonging.
- 38% of Canadians who live with others said parks have become more important to their sense of social connection during the pandemic, but this increases to [47%](#) for those who live alone.
- People living within a 5-minute walk of a transit stop are [15%](#) more likely to report a strong sense of community belonging.
- People who walk or cycle to work were [18%](#) more likely to report a strong sense of community belonging than those who drive.

## And yet, despite these facts:

- An AARP study in 2017 found that lack of social connection was related to [\\$6.7 billion](#) annually in Medicare spending.
- A [survey](#) of 33,000 U.S. college students found that two-thirds were struggling with loneliness and feelings of isolation.
- Prior to the pandemic, nearly [twice as many](#) adolescents in 2018 reported elevated levels of loneliness compared to in 2012.
- [21%](#) of adults across the globe have reported severe loneliness during COVID-19.
- 25 million people over the age of 60 report [chronic loneliness](#), and this number is expected to grow to 35 million by 2030.

## What the Research Says

Recent data show that we can plan and design better built environments for social connection by:

- creating [“complete neighborhoods” through mixed-land use](#), which encourages cycling and walking, which promotes social well-being for [children](#), youth, adults and seniors.
- implementing destination-focused design with active transportation to sites of interaction such as cafes, community centres, shops, and schools, which [positively influences social capital](#).
- building effective transportation systems (i.e., well-connected public transit, safe and well-lit sidewalks, safe crossings, separated bike lanes, shelter), which facilitates social interactions as well as access to resources and facilities.
- increasing the density of the built environment which can positively impact social capital and trust. Notably, lower density development [can stratify communities into distinct social class groups](#), perpetuating neighborhood inequities.
- improving [access to destinations and walkability](#), which can increase neighborhood social cohesion and increase the frequency of social interactions.
- reducing neighborhood inequities within cities by improving [disparities in access](#) to parks and other recreational environments.
- promoting neighborhood safety (e.g., reducing exposure to crime, traffic hazards, and air and noise pollution) and developing more [green space](#), which can draw people outside and foster social interactions and community integration

*This policy brief was principally drafted by Nadha Hassen and Kirby Magid with contributions from Gita Jaffe.*

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