

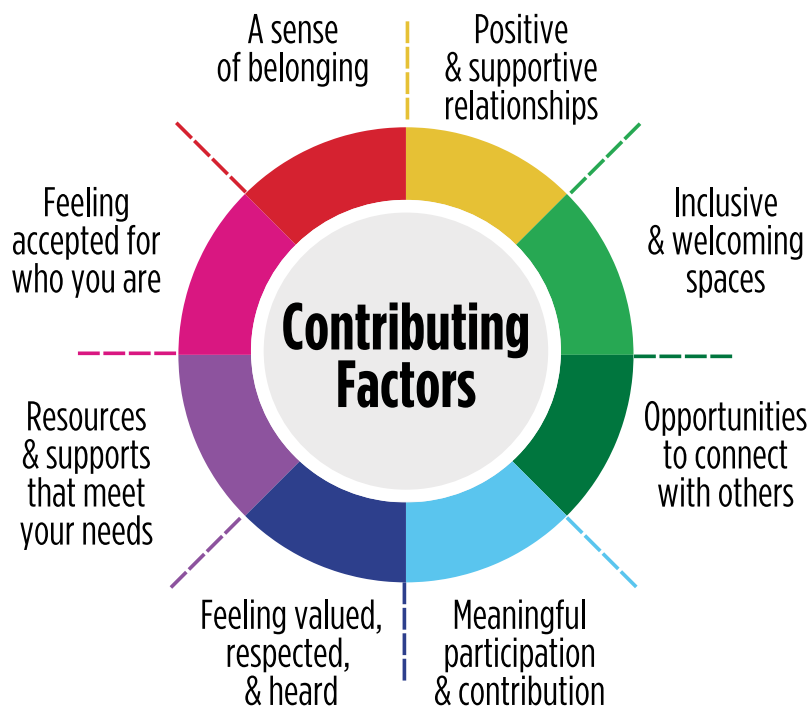


Social Connection

A PRIMER FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Social connection is about the many ways we relate to and interact with others.

Social connection contributes to a sense of belonging by creating the relationships, environments and opportunities that help people feel connected, valued, included and supported.



Why social connection matters

Social connection is a fundamental determinant of health that influences mental, physical, and community well-being.

Socially connected communities^{1,2}:

- Experience better health and well-being outcomes
- Demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement, volunteerism, community safety, and resilience
- Are better prepared to prevent, respond to, and recover from emergencies
- Have greater economic prosperity and lower levels of crime and violence
- Foster trust, participation and a sense of belonging among residents.



Third spaces

Third spaces are places outside of home, work and school where people gather and interact. These informal, accessible spaces, such as libraries, parks, cafés, community centres, trails, and community gardens, provide welcoming, low-pressure environments where people connect, build relationships, and develop a sense of belonging.

Canadian social connection guidelines

The [community guidelines](#) emphasize that social connection must be intentionally designed, funded, and embedded into local systems. They call on municipalities to treat connection as a core public health priority by creating inclusive spaces, investing in programs and community infrastructure, reducing barriers to participation, and embedding a “connection-in-all-policies” approach.

The role local governments can play

Municipal governments play a key role in fostering social connection by shaping environments, policies, and programs that help residents feel connected, included, and supported within their communities.



The following checklists can help assess the ways that social connection is supported in the community and provide insight into next steps.

Some of these examples are more realistic to implement in larger communities, but aspects of social connection can be incorporated in all communities (rural, villages, hamlets and towns).

How many boxes can you check?



Policy

Municipal policies can strengthen social connection by guiding decisions and resource allocation.

Include social connection language in municipal plans (e.g., Strategic Plans, Official Plans, Recreation Master Plans, Community Safety and Well-Being Plans)

Invest in meaningful [community engagement](#) recognizing that participation itself fosters connection

Create a shared-use space policy for community partners to use municipal-owned space to run programming

Reduce barriers for community groups to host events and programs (e.g., temporary street closures, clearly communicate how to navigate municipal processes)

Measure sense of belonging in resident surveys and collect lived experience insights from diverse communities

Consider the social impacts of policy decisions and assess how they can foster or inhibit social connection

Invest in accessible transportation to support residents to participate in community activities and visit friends and family

Allocate municipal funding and resources to support social connection priorities

Invest in staff training to advance reconciliation, equity, diversity and inclusion.

Community design

Well-designed public spaces encourage people to gather, interact and form meaningful relationships.

Invest in third spaces like libraries, community centres and outdoor spaces like parks, community gardens and public squares

Ensure municipal spaces, programs and events are accessible and inclusive

Co-design public spaces with the residents that use them to prioritize social connection (e.g., seating, shade, spaces for events)

Work with local artists to use art to enhance welcoming spaces

Design multi-unit housing with “social connection” in mind ([Multi-Unit Housing Design Toolkit](#))

Prioritize walkability and complete streets ([Complete Streets Overview | City of Toronto](#))

Offer amenities to encourage use of natural environments (e.g., signage/wayfinding for trails, washroom facilities, kayak rentals for waterways).

