

Protective Factor

# SOCIAL

Connection and Belonging



# WHERE TO START

Create opportunities with welcoming multi-functional public spaces and events.

Provide childcare and program options that engage all ages of children and youth.

Ensure access with options for independent mobility and transportation.

Model inclusivity, mobilize resources, host groups, and facilitate mentorships.

*When children are asked what matters most to their well-being, good quality relationships are cited as one of their top priorities.*

- The Office for National Statistics in London (UK)

# WHAT

Social connectedness and belonging happen when people connect in meaningful ways.

- A person experiences **social connectedness** through relationships with other people or engagement in their community.
- People develop a sense of **belonging** when they have meaningful interactions, feel valued, and fit in as part of a “we.”

Where we live, how we access public spaces, economic inclusion, social inclusion, safety and security all enable strong social connections for children, youth, and adults in their lives.

## THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF SENSE OF BELONGING:



1. **Authentic interaction such as opportunities to empathize and develop relationships with others**
2. **Feeling welcome through social interactions and the physical environment**
3. **Shared experiences through common interests, goals, and traits<sup>1</sup>**

## YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE AND NEED DIFFERENT CONNECTIONS AT DIFFERENT LIFE STAGES.

### EARLY YEARS



### MIDDLE CHILDHOOD & ADOLESCENCE

In the early years, social connection is most reliant on a strong attachment to caregivers.<sup>2</sup> Caregivers provide and shape the environments and experiences of young children, and their well-being impacts the children in their care.<sup>3</sup>

As children age, their social environment expands to include peers, childcare providers, educators, mentors, and other members of the community.<sup>4</sup>

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHONE LIGHT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY TO KEEP CONNECTED.<sup>5</sup>

However, not everyone has reliable access to the internet or digital devices which can lead to health and social inequalities.<sup>6</sup> Online connection cannot replace in-person interaction, particularly for young people.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Engaging through digital platforms is often seen as social connection when it is actually just communication and can lead to feelings of disconnection, social exclusion and isolation.<sup>10,11</sup>

How much social media use that young people engage in, as well as how they use social media may determine its positive and negative impacts.<sup>12,13</sup>

# WHY

*Studies have found that a strong sense of belonging is associated with self-rated mental health for all ages, even when controlled for geography and socio-economic status.*<sup>14,15</sup>

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND BELONGING AS PART OF A VIBRANT COMMUNITY

Relationships are one of the strongest predictors of children's well-being throughout the life course, impacting lifelong health, success in education, occupational attainment, and job performance.<sup>16,17</sup>

The quality and stability of relationships in the early years are critical to social-emotional development and set the foundation for well-being into adulthood.<sup>18,19</sup>

Positive peer relationships promote healthier behaviours, buffer the effects of life stressors and contribute to a better sense of self, social competence, academic performance and life satisfaction.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup>

Children's positive relationships with adults in the community is correlated with outcomes such as resiliency, positive mental health, mitigation of toxic stress, motivation to learn, impulse control and social competence.<sup>24,25,26,27</sup>

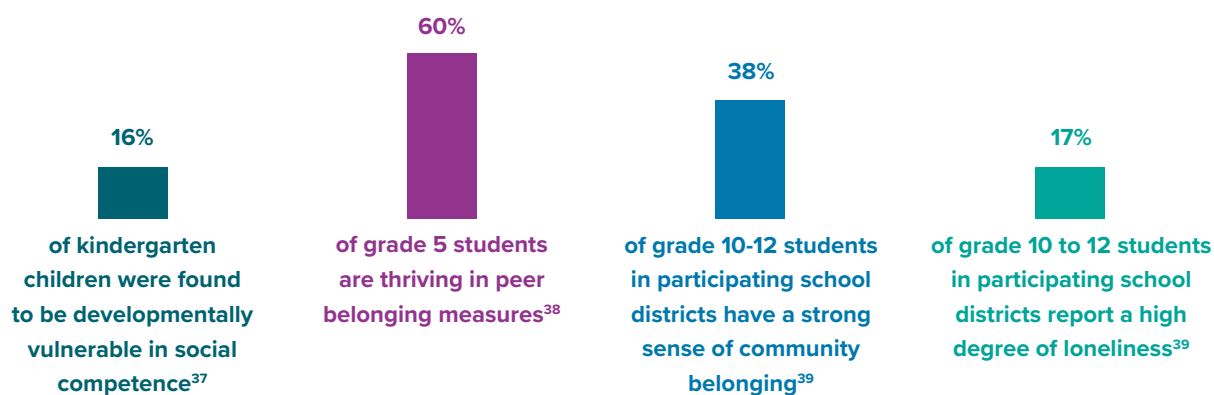
Having a positive role model helps young people to feel safe and socially supported and these types of high quality contacts with non-parental adults are associated with higher mental well-being, fewer behavioural problems, and better overall social skills.<sup>28,29,30</sup> Building relationships with

adults in the community also helps to increase children's sense of neighbourhood safety and belonging, encourage participation in community activities and provide more social opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

*People with higher levels of social support tend to be more engaged in their community, and experience lower levels of psychological distress, stronger resiliency, and lower prevalence of mental illness.*<sup>4,32,33,34,35</sup>

Strong neighbourhood social cohesion is associated with less depression and anxiety among young people, as well as increased resilience to adverse events and a higher likelihood to exhibit prosocial behaviour such as helping, consoling, and cooperating with others.<sup>36</sup>

Indicators of social development, social connection, and belonging have been trending downward across the Vancouver Coastal region since before the COVID-19 pandemic.





# HOW

## ACTIONS LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT SOCIAL CONNECTION & BELONGING

This section provides a glimpse of the “how.” It is meant to stimulate thought and discussion and provide inspiration rather than prescribing actions. The majority of examples included here are evidence-based, evaluated, have been implemented by several local governments and/or have continued to be implemented over time. They represent a mere fraction of the information and tools that are available. Ultimately, the “how” is always dependent on any given local context and its priority issues, opportunities, available assets, and what has been tried in the past.

### LEGEND

-  RURAL/SMALL TOWN
-  URBAN/MID-SIZED COMMUNITY
-  INTERNATIONAL

## CREATE A STRATEGY

 Bristol, UK

### Strategy for Children and Young People: Belonging in the Community 2021-2024

The City of Bristol created a [strategy](#) with the goal of every child and young person to feel a sense of connection to their city and a freedom to be themselves. The views of children and youth were used to establish a set of priorities to help young people to feel valued and supported in the context of their city. Content included mental health & well-being, race equality, community assets, and violence.

*Goal: “We want every child and young person to feel a keen sense of connection to their city and a freedom to be themselves.”*

- City of Bristol



## EXPLORATION OF ACTIONS

 Kitchener, Waterloo, & Woolwich, Ontario

### We Can Design Belonging

The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation completed a project with the goal to understand the state of belonging in the area and to develop and prototype an approach for improving on the current state of belonging. Content in the [report](#) includes the building blocks of belonging, authentic interactions, shared purpose, feeling welcome, obstacles to belonging, and demographic differences.



## PROJECT

 Copenhagen, Denmark

### The Urban Belonging Project

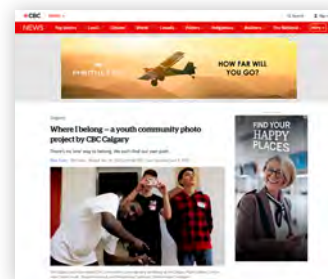
The [Urban Belonging Project](#) investigated how people perceive, experience, and attach themselves to the City of Copenhagen. The project was launched in 2021 by a group of planners and academics to map the lived experiences of under-represented communities in the city. When and where do people feel at home in cities? Which signals and visual cues stimulate attachment to place? How do different people read and respond to these signals? Over 3 months, participants went on 100+ walks, took 1400+ photos, built 200+ maps, and further elaborated on their experiences in workshops. The result is a catalogue that tells individual and collective stories of belonging. The final phase includes outreach activities targeted at urban planners, architects, and others through blog posts, podcasts, exhibitions, and conferences.



 Calgary, Alberta

### Where I Belong: A Youth Community Photo Project

[Where I Belong](#) was a partnership between CBC, City of Calgary Library, and Umoja Community Music, an NGO that focuses on youth and inclusion. The project involved ten young residents from Calgary borrowing CBC cameras, receiving training in photography, and setting out to explore their city and documenting what belonging means to them. The goal was to build skills and connections, as well as an understanding that while belonging is critical to everyone’s well-being, there are many different paths to find it.



## ACTION PLAN

 Barcelona, Spain

### Action Plan 2020-2024: Municipal Strategy for Combatting Loneliness 2020-2023

A survey done by the City of Barcelona found that 70,000 people from all age groups felt lonely often or very often. The City created an [Action Plan](#) to combat this. Examples of actions in the plan include: conducting an analysis of loneliness among people with disabilities, hosting a conference “Look Closely: Loneliness Affects Young People Too,” restructuring the city to create community spaces that encourage connection, strengthening organizational development to support municipal staff (e.g., detect loneliness among municipal staff and implement measures to tackle it), including loneliness perspective in municipal grants, and promoting volunteering to combat loneliness at all life stages. They also have actions targeted at children and youth such as facilitating access to leisure activities and developing *Aqui t’escoltem* (We Listen to You Here) for people 12-20 years old that provides tools and resources to strengthen personal and social skills and encourage personal growth. The City also created a [website](#) which lists and maps, by age group, more than 50 municipal services that help combat loneliness,



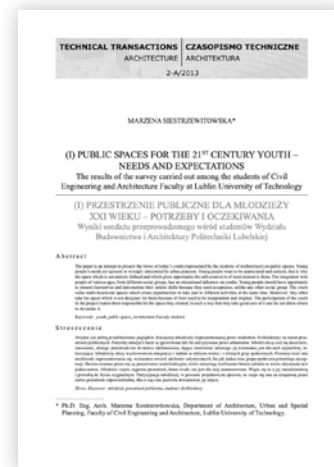


# INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROGRAMMING

 Lublin, Poland

## Research: Public Spaces for the 21st Century Youth – Needs and Expectations

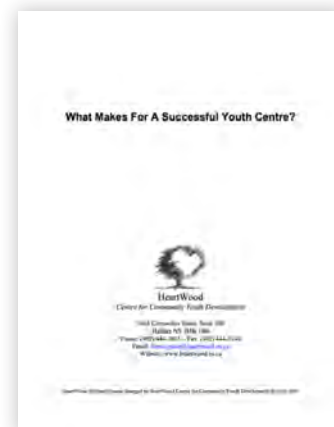
[Survey results](#) carried out by civil engineering and architecture students from Lublin University found that well designed space influences the social behaviour of youth. Spaces that provide an opportunity for self-creation rather than being entirely designed and defined are preferred. Seating for larger and smaller groups, intimate alcoves, multi-functional space that allows for different activities at the same time, greenery, and the integration with people of various ages and from different social groups were all common themes that emerged.



 Nova Scotia

## Research: What Makes for a Successful Youth Centre?

A team of young people across Nova Scotia conducted a participatory action research project on what makes a successful youth centre. [The report](#) covers elements such as mentorship and community connectedness.



 Sweden

## Research: Leisure-Time Youth Centres as Health-Promoting Settings: Experiences from Multicultural Neighbourhoods in Sweden

[This study](#) involved surveying youth at two youth centres in multicultural, socially-deprived suburbs in Sweden. Structured and unstructured leisure-time activities are offered by centres with an emphasis on fostering supportive relationships and youth empowerment. Staff are trained professional youth workers and volunteers are older youth and former participants with leadership training. The survey results revealed that what was most important to youth is that the activities enable them to hang out with friends, as well as make new friends in a safe and respectful atmosphere. Participants rated “leaders and adults who care about me” just below “making new friends” and just above “seeing current friends.”

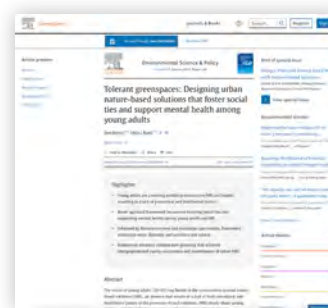


# ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

 Sydney & Melbourne, Australia

## Research: Designing Urban Nature-Based Solutions that Foster Social Ties and Support Mental Health among Young Adults

Research shows youth prefer green spaces as places to both hang out with friends and to seek solace in solitude, with elements such as cleanliness, wildness, space for a range of activities, and freedom from supervision. An [Urban Greenspace Appraisal Framework](#) was tested on green spaces in Sydney and Melbourne. The themes in framework are 1) Order: spaces that maintain their naturalness without feeling messy, uncared for or unsafe; 2) Diversity: both plant diversity and diversity of features to carry out a range of activities; 3) Seclusion and Retreat: freedom from formal and informal social control by adults.



# GREENING AND ACTIVATION OF STREETS

 Antwerp, Belgium

## Neighbourhood Greening: Living Streets

[Living Streets](#) is the City of Antwerp's targeted action to encourage residents to create lively and nature-filled streets. Residents can apply for funding for soil and plants and receive advice from an expert who can suggest appropriate plants for their local area. The goal is to make it easy for residents to take action. Neighbourhoods are also encouraged to shut down their streets to traffic during the summer and are provided with funds for seating, play equipment, and overnight campouts. Living streets zones are recognized by their light interventions of colour road markings, pedestrians are permitted to use the full width of the road, playing is allowed, no parking is permitted, and the speed limit is 20km/hour.



# COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING FOR MARGINALIZED YOUTH



Scotland

## Exploring Youth’s Perceptions of the Hidden Practice of Youth Work in Increasing Social Capital with Young People Considered NEET in Scotland

[A study](#) in both urban and rural areas in Scotland looked at the impact of community-based programs in creating social capital amongst NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) young people deemed socially excluded or marginalized. The youth participants felt negativity was directed at them from more formal and traditional structures within the community (e.g., police, libraries, local shops) which they felt affected equal opportunities which resulted in feelings of resentment and isolation. The programs offered involvement in sports, music, media skills, and job readiness. Youth workers help to build self-esteem, remove barriers, and develop trusting relationships. Youth wanted to help others as they themselves had been helped and they began to generate ideas about interventions that could help their local communities to become more inclusive.



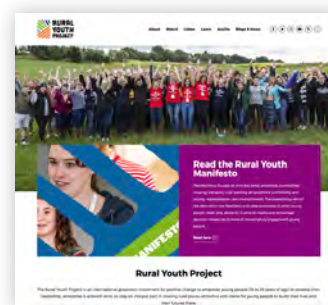
# FESTIVALS AND OTHER GATHERINGS



UK, Greece, & Romania

## Rural Youth Ideas Festival

[The Rural Youth Ideas Festival](#) was a gathering to bring together young people to share ideas on how to make life better for themselves and their peers. The festival included a series of talks, workshops, music, food and camping to promote fun, leadership, and networking.

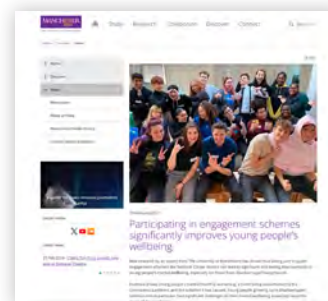


# VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

 United Kingdom

## National Citizen Service

The [National Citizen Service](#) provides 16- and 17-year-olds with local community experiences, social action projects and other volunteering opportunities. The Futuremakers program targets 18- to 24-year-olds with paid work placements ranging from 9 to 12 months. Participation in the program led to a significant improvement in mental well-being and this was still evident 4 to 6 months after they had finished taking part. Former participants reported an increase in the number of people they felt they could rely on for support if they needed help; and, they became more confident in themselves and felt a greater sense of control over their lives and future. Taking part also appeared to close the gap in well-being between those from the least and most disadvantaged communities.



# YOUTH-IDENTIFIED ACTIVITIES IN THEIR RURAL COMMUNITIES

 Quebec

## Partenaires 12-18

Partenaires 12-18 started in the rural municipality of Lyster, Quebec when a group of 12-year-olds said that there was nothing to do in their community. They wanted opportunities to participate in recreation and other activities. The program was established as a partnership between the young people, parents, the municipality, local businesses and others. Coached by adults, young people learned to establish committees and decision-making structures and how to set goals. The program has expanded over the years and is now found in 21 rural municipalities in Quebec.

# STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT



## Strategies and Tactics for Retaining and Encouraging Youth to Return to Small and/or Rural Communities

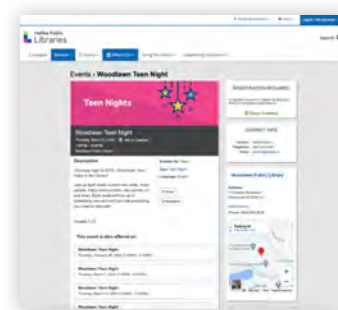
The Ontario Project looked at how to communicate to and with youth in grades 9 to 12 that their towns can support their career development, and how to increase the emotional engagement and connection for youth in grades 6 to 12 to build a stronger association of their rural community as being their “home.” The project also looked at the need to train municipal Economic Development Officers in how to bring together schools and businesses and how to engage with students on a regular basis.

## PROGRAMMATIC



### Woodlawn Library Teen Night

The [Woodlawn Library Teen Night](#), a weekly event for the past 12 years, typically attracts around 50 participants in grades 7 to 12. The event features organized activities, a drop-in component, and opportunities for open mic performances and socializing. Many former attendees return as volunteers or program assistants, and the staff often provides references for their first jobs. Teen Night had a positive impact on youth mental health during the pandemic and it’s seen as a safe and accepting space.

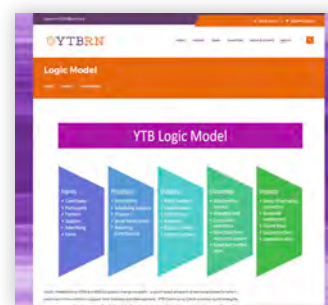


## PROGRAM ELEMENT



### Youth Time Banking

[Youth time banking](#) involves youth earning time credits to support their interests and development. Some youth programs treat youth as service recipients. Some community service programs emphasize doing good without collecting givers and receivers. The organization YTB combines aspects of both approaches with loops of giving and receiving and paying it forward to build community. YTB also created YTBGenZ customized for GenZ ages 14-25 and provides opportunities for marginalized youth to make contributions to community, practice leadership, and develop social capital.







# TOOLS & RESOURCES

**Tactic: Young People Now:** Positive Public Images of and Stories about Young People

<https://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/youthandpolicy1011-1.pdf#page=4>

**How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice:** A Step-by-Step Tool Kit for Program Managers

[https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Full\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Full_Toolkit.pdf)

**Socially Connected Communities:** Action Guide for Local Governments and Community Leaders

[https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Socially-Connected-Communities\\_Action-Guide-for-Local-Government-and-Community-Leaders.pdf](https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Socially-Connected-Communities_Action-Guide-for-Local-Government-and-Community-Leaders.pdf)

**Social Connectedness Action Guide**

<https://planh.ca/socialconnectionguide>

**Tackling Loneliness through the Built Environment:** Promising Approaches Framework

<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/CEL-Tackling-loneliness-through-the-built-environment-Final.pdf>

**Happy Homes Interactive Toolkit**

<https://happycities.com/happy-homes-toolkit>

**Hey Neighbour! A Resident Animators Guide.** Recipes for Building Connections between Neighbours

<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/hey-neighbour-recipe-book-resident-animators-guide.pdf>

**Photovoice**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1472586X.2010.523274?journalCode=rvst20>



# RESEARCH

## **The Effects of Play Streets on Social and Community Connectedness in Rural Communities**

<https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Gill-Can-I-Play-Out.pdf>

## **The Pedestrian Pound: The Business Case for Better Streets and Places**

<https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/media/3890/pedestrian-pound-2018.pdf>

## **The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-Analysis of Outcome Studies**

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-019-00982-8>

## **“I just feel safe with him” : Emotional Closeness in Male Youth Mentoring Relationships**

<https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F1524-9220.8.3.185>

## **Mentoring Interventions to Affect Juvenile Delinquency and Associated Problems: A Systematic Review**

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4073/csr.2013.10>

## **Unpacking Community-Based Youth Mentoring Relationships: An Integrative Review**

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8198211/>

# BOOKS

## **Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Well-Being** by J Roe and L McCay

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/restorative-cities-9781350112889/>

## **Community Programs to Promote Youth Development**

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/10022/chapter/7>

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