

# Healthy Social Environments: How can we facilitate social connectivity at the neighbourhood level and why does it matter?



BC Centre for Disease Control  
Provincial Health Services Authority

**Dec 16th 2020. 11-12:30pm  
PST**

Speaker:

Charito Gailling, HBE Project  
Manager, Population & Public Health,  
BCCDC



People who are socially disconnected are less likely to receive help from others, which could make a critical difference in times of crisis or emergency.

... 50% greater risk of dying early (the same impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day).

... more likely to be in the top 5% of health care users, which accounts for more than 50% of total healthcare spending.

*“Connected Communities, Healthier Together” Annual Report, Ontario Chief MHO, 2017*

When people feel connected to each other, to their local neighbourhood & to public institutions...



- Trust, cooperativeness, resiliency
- Social, physical and mental health
- Physical activity
- Healthy eating



- Anxiety
- Depression
- Distrust
- Isolation
- Premature death

The strength of our social connections, our feelings of inclusion and support in our relationships and communities, is integral to our physical and mental health.<sup>1,2</sup> People with weak social connections have a 50% greater risk of death than those with stronger connections; an effect on mortality as strong as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly important because evidence tells us that in our communities social connections are becoming weaker and people are becoming lonelier and more isolated.<sup>4</sup>

Strong social connections are thought to enhance health by buffering the negative effects of stress and promoting healthier behaviours.<sup>5,6</sup> It turns out that our perceptions of social support can help us cope and recover from stressful situations faster.<sup>7</sup> Effective stress management has been shown to lower anxiety and inflammation while enhancing immunity.<sup>8,9</sup> When we feel connected we value and encourage healthier behaviour for ourselves and others through activities like exercising, eating well, and adhering to medical regimens.<sup>10</sup>

We can take action to build social connectedness. For example, our built environments help shape the structure of our community, and can facilitate or impair the development and maintenance of our social connections and health behaviours.<sup>11</sup> Community design can facilitate active mobility, create natural spaces for gathering and promote feeling safe and secure. This way, community design can create environments that foster social connection.<sup>12-14</sup> When our environments become places of social inclusion and support, we are all more resilient.

Data for this report on social connection are from the *My Health My Community* survey, which was conducted in 2013-2014 across the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Over 32,000 people, aged 18 years and older, participated in the survey. In this report we describe social connection primarily through two indicators.

1) Perception of community belonging (somewhat strong/very strong sense of community belonging is a primary indicator in this report, hence described as strong sense of community belonging).

2) The number of people you can confide in, tell your problems to, or call when you really need help (4 or more people to confide in is a primary indicator in this report).

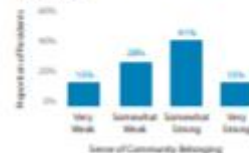
Combined, these indicators provide insight into the strength of our social networks and broader communities to foster health and well-being in our region.



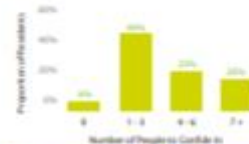
#### KEY MESSAGES

- 43% OF RESIDENTS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S LOWER MAINLAND REPORT LOW OR VERY LOW SENSE OF COMMUNITY BELONGING.
- FEELING LIKE WE BELONG IN OUR COMMUNITY AND HAVING PEOPLE TO CONFIDE IN ARE STRONG INDICATORS OF GENERAL & MENTAL HEALTH.
- HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS LIKE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND EATING FRUITS AND VEGETABLES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE REPORTED BY THOSE WITH GREATER SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS.
- PEOPLE WITH LOWER LEVELS OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS REPORT HIGHER LEVELS OF STRESS.
- PEOPLE IN NEIGHBOURHOODS WITH HIGHER RESIDENT-RATED BUILT ENVIRONMENT FEATURES REPORT GREATER SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS.
- THE LENGTH OF TIME YOU LIVE IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD IS STRONGLY RELATED TO COMMUNITY BELONGING REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YOU RENT OR OWN YOUR HOME.

#### SENSE OF COMMUNITY BELONGING AMONG RESIDENTS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S LOWER MAINLAND



#### NUMBER OF PEOPLE TO CONFIDE IN AMONG RESIDENTS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S LOWER MAINLAND




## VCH “My Health My Community” (2018)

People who feel strong connection to community are 2.6 times more likely to be in good health

People with 7 confidants are 3.4 x more likely to be in good mental health

32% of British Columbians do not feel a sense of belonging in their community (43% in Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health regions)



**Social connectedness** = the degree to which you feel connected to other people and have a sense of belonging in your communities.

**It includes:**

- **Social Capital** – access to resources & support
- **Social Cohesion** – feelings of belongingness
- **Social inclusion** – participation & engagement

# Social environment: *What is it?*

The ***social environment*** is the underlying social, cultural & economic contexts within which we live. It includes all of the structures & processes we create, relationships we have, and actions we take to organize and improve our lives

- Present at multiple levels
- People centre/relationship oriented
- Comprised of multiple interconnected features
- Influenced by power relations





If we create local policies & initiatives to increase social connections... and stick to our core values of equity & sustainability....



**Community well-being**  
the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfill their potential.

*Community Well-being: A Framework for Design Professionals, DIALOG*

*“healthy people in vibrant communities”*





## Healthy Built Environments Linkages Toolkit

- Neighbourhood design
- Housing
- Food systems
- Natural environments
- Transportation



- Arts & Culture
- Recreation
- Civic Engagement
- Local Economy
- Service Environment



**Healthy  
Social  
Enviro  
Framework**



# Methodology

Nov  
2018

Exploratory  
consultation

Lit searches,  
vetting &  
assessment

Theming  
and rolling  
up the  
evidence

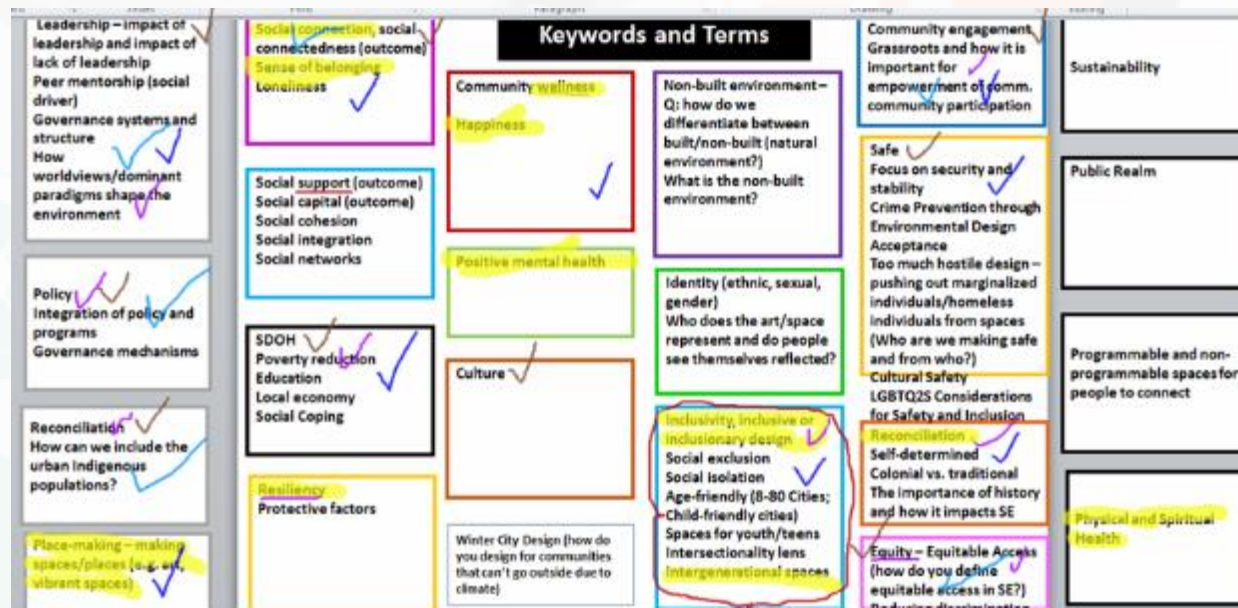
Nov-Dec  
2020

Consultation  
on draft  
principles  
and content

Feb  
2021

Final report  
and KT  
materials

2000 findings assessed + 131 ppl consulted = 51 draft principles

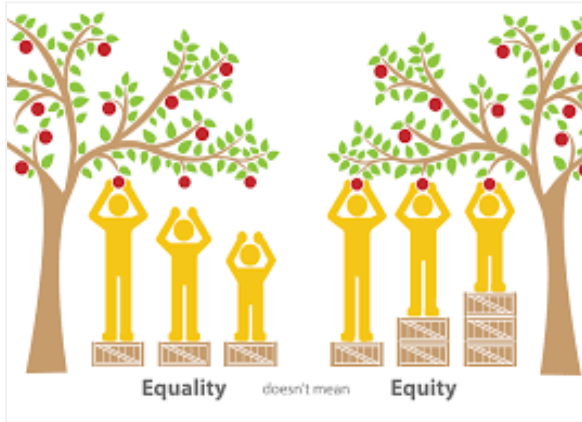


Healthy Social Environments  
Framework  
draft 24Nov2020



Healthy people  
in  
vibrant communities

# Values



## Equity

- Truth & Reconciliation
- Cultural safety & humility
- Diversity
- Inclusivity
- Availability, affordability acceptability & accessibility



## Sustainability

- Healthy community environments
- Meaningful, inclusive & respectful community engagement
- Multisolving approach & co-benefits
- Resiliency, trust & flexibility

# Features & Principles



## Transportation



### Built Environment Principles

- Use street designs that prioritize active transportation.
- Make active transportation networks safe & accessible for all ages & abilities.
- Design connected routes for active transportation & support multiple modalities.
- Consider aesthetics of road, rail & waterway networks.



### Social Environment Principles

- Promote programs that help foster a culture of active transportation (AT) and support people in reducing personal car use:
  - Address barriers and change attitudes & behaviours
  - Provide financial incentives to encourage AT & disincentives to discourage car use
  - Prioritize workplace interventions that encourage changes in commuter behaviour
- Promote active transportation interventions that facilitate neighborhood involvement and prioritize interventions that help promote social support & interaction.

# Tools & Facilitators





# The Whole Story

## Community Wellbeing



### Interventions

- Technology & media
- Programs & incentives
- Policies & regulations
- Health promotion
- Community engagement
- Neighbourhood-led projects
- Partnerships

### Social Connection

Social capital  
Access to  
resources &  
support

Social cohesion  
Belonging

Social inclusion  
Participation &  
“being seen”

Population-health  
Mental wellness  
Physical health  
Social wellbeing  
Emotional health  
Spiritual health  
Happiness \* QOL

Community-based  
Economic health  
Environmental health  
Community resiliency  
Sustainability  
Civic participation  
Neighbourliness  
Leadership  
Equity  
Trust

and can achieve  
these outcomes  
in the long term

we get these  
outcomes in  
the short-term

while  
implementing  
SE & BE  
interventions

and apply  
the values

If we pursue  
the practice  
principles

- Initiate conversations
- Frame presentations, proposals & briefing documents
- Quick reference to health evidence & expert perspectives
- Guide research & education
- Encourage collaborative action by community stakeholders



**How can I  
use this  
Framework  
?**

# SE Project Advisors



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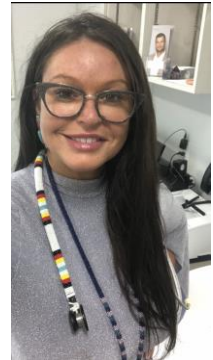
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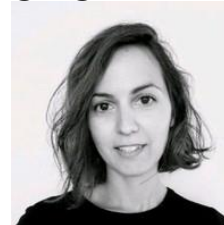
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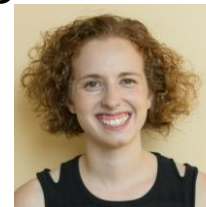
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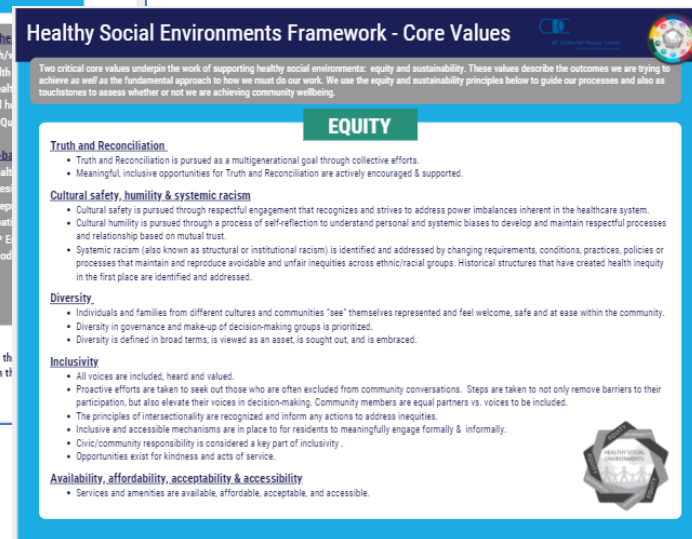
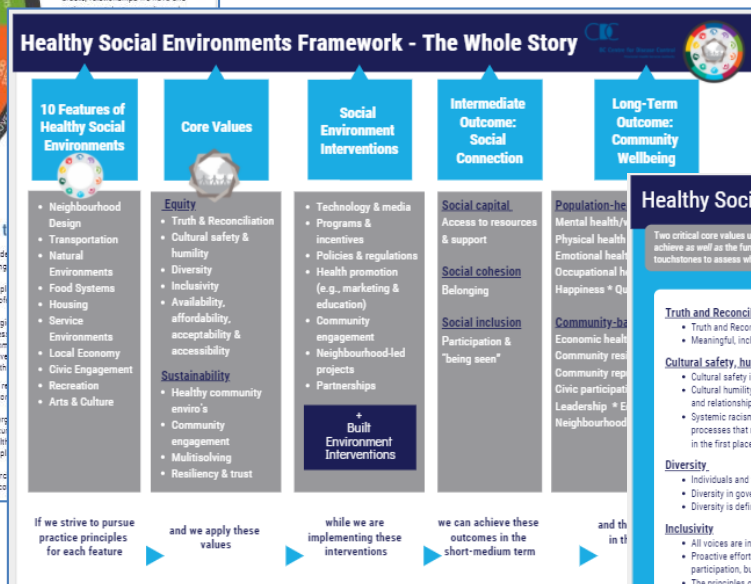


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