

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council in collaboration
with Employment and Social
Development Canada

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision making across all sectors, toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **The Emerging Asocial Society**.

Making friends at community organizations: How do place-based community organizations promote friendship formation?

About the project

Neighbourhoods are often in flux. High residential mobility means neighbours often leave communities for new destinations. When new residents arrive, they may come from across town, across the nation or across the ocean. This increased mobility brings strangers regularly into contact and introduces a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, all of which creates challenges for building social connections. This report explores the process of making new friends through participation in place-based community organizations.

Friends represent one of the core components of our intimate and social lives. They improve happiness and life satisfaction (Demir et al. 2015) and provide support, services and emotional and financial aid (Wellman and Wortley 1990). The emerging asocial society includes individualizing pressures that contribute to loneliness and isolation with direct consequences for health and well-being, and indirect consequences such as attraction to conspiracy theories and anti-immigration attitudes (Hertz 2021; Hutson 2017; Messing and Sagvari 2019). Guided by the core question, "how do situational dynamics in place-based community organizations contribute to friendships within diverse local contexts," this report provides a synthesis of the state of knowledge since 2010 concerning friendship formation and community-building through participation in community organizations.

Key findings

- Place-based community organizations, including community centres, churches, libraries and neighbourhood houses, provide services and satisfy the needs and desires of participants through structured programming and activities that bring people together and facilitate interaction. Over time, with regular interaction, these programs create opportunities for friendship to emerge.
- Place-based organizations also develop programs and activities to provide opportunities to make new friends, such as someone new to a neighbourhood looking to meet their neighbours, a young person trying to fit in or a senior experiencing social isolation.
- Place-based community organizations that successfully promote friendship formation balance structured programs and activities with a safe space for informal interaction where conviviality, trust and support allow a sense of mutuality to develop among participants. Participants attribute their friendships formed while engaged in activities such as gardening and knitting to the fun they have while participating in the activity.
- Staff and other leaders contribute to friendship formation by creating a safe, welcoming, convivial and supportive atmosphere—environments that promote a sense of belonging among participants.

- The physical structures of place-based organizations successfully promote friendship formation when they include space for formal programs and activities and space for informal conversations that go beyond immediate activities and allow participants to get to know one another.
- Place-based community organizations promote friendship formation by providing opportunities for participants to meet others with similar experiences, backgrounds and interests. Examples include a group of African youth who recently immigrated to Canada and met at a local community centre, or a group of antenatal mothers forming friendships as they embark on motherhood.
- Place-based community organizations promote diverse friendship formation when they attract a diverse mix of participants to the programs and activities of the organizations. Cultural differences of race, ethnicity and religion predominate. A common program with cross-boundary friendships includes mothers participating in playgroups or toddler drop-in programs at community centres. Making friends across age and class differences is also common, including a holiday program in Northern Ireland that brought together Protestant and Catholic youth from the neighbourhood.
- Regular interaction over time allows participants to recognize shared values, experiences and desires across differences of race, ethnicity, age and class. In addition, mutuality emerges as participants develop new interests together through their participation. A youth engagement program, implemented at community centres across the United Kingdom, for instance, documented interethnic friendship formation that persisted up to two months after the end of the program.
- Neighbourhood houses provide an example of a place-based community organization model that has been operating for over 100 years around the world. These organizations do not focus on a particular demographic group or a single activity. Instead, they appeal to a diversity of backgrounds and cater to a variety of interests. This model provides the opportunity for new, diverse friendships to emerge.

Policy implications

- Many processes associated with the emerging asocial society take place at the local community and neighbourhood level. A renewed attention to place-based approaches in public resources distribution and programming can address outcomes such as isolation, loneliness and lack of social cohesion.
- Place-based community organizations form an essential part of the local social infrastructure. Encouraging and strengthening place-based organizations can successfully address elements of the emerging asocial society at the local level.
- Urban planning can provide space for place-based organizations to provide services for local people and increase local social interaction.
- Funding place-based programming through community organizations directed at local residents will enhance friendship formation. These programs can successfully facilitate connections and friendships either directly or indirectly.
- Despite the potential of community organizations for friendship formation, there remains a limited amount of research in this area. Support for more research on place-based community organizations will help fill this gap in our understanding.

CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS

Sean Lauer, Lead Investigator, professor,
University of British Columbia; sean.lauer@ubc.ca

Karen Lok Yi Wong, University of British Columbia;
karenwonglokyi2011@gmail.com

Miu Chung Yan, University of British Columbia;
miu.yan@ubc.ca

FURTHER INFORMATION

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