Belonging & Civic Muscle

The vital condition of Belonging & Civic Muscle is about having fulfilling relationships and the social support people need to thrive. It's about being part of a community, contributing to its vibrancy, and developing the power to co-create a common world.

Belonging and Civic Muscle is an indispensable vital condition that we all depend on for our health and well-being. Social support through friends, family, and other networks contributes to our practical and emotional needs, enhances mental well-being, helps us navigate the challenges of life and reinforces healthy behaviors. People with a stronger sense of efficacy, belonging and social connectedness tend to live healthier, happier lives.

At the community and neighborhood level, social cohesion strengthens social ties and engenders collective attachment. Higher levels of social cohesion are associated with higher levels of trust, cooperation and social capital, providing the necessary foundations for creating healthy patterns for working together across groups and sectors, building the "civic infrastructure" for community members to co-create a shared future. These patterns can create a virtuous cycle – working together supports building stronger communication, develops a sense of connectedness and mutual obligation. As sense of being valued and cared for within community grows, people become more confident and willing to participate in community, contributing to its vibrancy and affecting change.

Continuing influence of past legacies

Concentrated poverty: Concentrated poverty has increased dramatically since the 1970s. Many low income communities experience ongoing trauma, disempowerment, and disinvestment. Increasing concentrations of wealth combined with persistent structural racism act to reinforce the wealth gaps between white households and households of color.

Polarization: Americans have increasingly sorted themselves into communities that mirror and reinforce their existing viewpoints, interests, and beliefs; as neighborhoods become more politically and economically segregated, there is an increase in political and cultural polarization.

Voting: Voting participation in the United States trails most other developed countries. Lack of agreement on structural and legal reforms to increase participation in the political process undermines the representativeness and health of our electoral democracy.

Social movements: Social movements have been instrumental in bringing about social and political changes throughout the history of the United States, such as the Women's Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Marriage Equality and transgender rights movements.

Culture: Cultural oppression throughout the history of the United States has devastated many communities. Cultures have been erased, traditions and languages lost, and communities continue to be oppressed and fractured by persistent bigotry, racism and hate. The impacts of these deep inequities are evident across every dimension of measure of well-being. Yet, communities remain resilient and efforts to preserve cultural identities have expanded in recent years. Expression of culture builds community, cohesion and social capital.

Civil society: "Civil society" has evolved into a diverse set of 1.5 million organizations – ranging from local volunteer-led initiatives to (inter)national multibillion-dollar enterprises. At the community level, the presence of social associations says something about a community's social capital, and social isolation in that community. Social support networks, and places with high levels of social trust correlate with better health. Disinvested in communities have weaker social support networks.

Current conditions

Only **a third** of people believe that "most people can be trusted," **down from 50%** in the 1970s.[1]

1 in 5 people report regularly spending time with neighbors.[2]

Loneliness has **doubled to 40%** since the 1980s.[3]

The number of people who say they have no one to turn to during difficult times **tripled** between 1985 and 2004.[4]

62.5 million adults volunteer.[5]

Fewer than **3 in 10** Americans belong to a community organization or group. Membership in groups has decreased by more than 13% between 1974 and 2004.[6]

4.6 million youth are not in school or working (i.e., "disconnected"). Rates of disconnection are significantly higher for Native American (**26%**), Black/African American (**17%**) and Latino (**14%**) youth.[7]

55% of voting-age people voted in the 2016 election. Voting participation is lowest among younger people and people of Hispanic/Latino background.[8]

Fewer than **3 in 10** Millennials believe that politics is an effective means for changing society.[9]

More than 20% of tribal communities have no access to broadband access, seven times the proportion of non-tribal communities.[10]

The number of identifiable hate groups has **doubled** since 1999.[11]

[1]Center for Active Design; [2]Project for Public Spaces; [3]AARP; [4]American Psychological Review; [5]Nonprofit Quarterly; [6]Civic Enterprise; [7]Social Science Research Council; [8]United States Election Project; [9]Center for Active Design; [10]U.S FCC; [11]Southern Poverty Law Center

Disconnected young people: Impacts of persistent disconnection among young people accrue at individual and community levels. Vulnerable youth are cut off from people, institutions, and experiences through which they develop the knowledge, and build skills and a sense of purpose for productive adulthoods. Social isolation precipitates loneliness, self-doubt, depression, anxiety about the future, and adoption of unhealthy behaviors. As they grow, disconnected young people are less socially mobile, less engaged in civic life, more likely to become justice-involved, more reliant on public assistance, and generally experience lower levels of physical and mental health.

Major forces shaping current and future priorities

Despair: Social isolation, disconnection and loneliness among people of all ages is growing.

Technology: Communication and information technology is changing the way we engage and connect, and is redefining community, extending our sense of community well beyond physical place and expanding the potential scale of civic action.

Civic life: "Civic Deserts" or communities without opportunity for engagement are increasingly common in the United States. A robust civic life is associated with a range of well-being outcomes, including: lower mortality rates and better physical and mental health; positive relations with others, personal growth, sense of purpose, and feelings of autonomy and independence; lower crime rates; and less inequality, higher per-capita incomes, and better long-term economic prospects.

Open government: Open government and open data movements of recent decades have increased transparency and accountability. Technological innovations are changing community engagement and the ways in which local governments work.

Local action: Given increasing gridlock at national and state levels, the local level has emerged as the most effective locus of change for addressing public issues. Localities increasingly work individually and as collectives to catalyze transformational change.

Multi-sector collaboration: Collaboration across sectors is transforming health and how we work together to co-create and maintain it. Multi-sector partnerships have grown in number and impact in recent years, and other collaborative efforts, like Health in All Policies, are becoming more common too. Health in All Policies incorporates health considerations into decision-making across sectors. Fundamentally collaborative, health in all policies offers a powerful lens to assure vital conditions are met.

Community space: Community spaces are open, free, gathering places like parks, libraries and community centers. They have the power to strengthen social bonds and social capital; they encourage diversity and encounter, create a sense of place, and cultivate belonging. Efforts to reclaim, expand, and create new public spaces are blossoming.

Racial generation gap: Demographic shifts are underway as the United States simultaneously ages and becomes increasingly diverse. Older adults are predominantly white, while young people are less white than previous generations. By 2020, kids of color will be the majority, and by 2040 the majority of people in the United States will be non-white. This phenomenon known as the "racial generation gap" has major implications for equity and well-being across political and social life.

What are important priorities or ways to ensure a positive legacy?

There are infinite opportunities to make progress, across every sphere of influence.
Here are just a few that could yield great benefits:

1. Create opportunities for acknowledging and acting collectively to address historical and structural racism (and other forms of institutionalized privilege)

2. Resist the rise of organized hate groups

3. Invest in the "civic infrastructure" of our communities, including the institutional capacity to support community organizing, resident participation and collaboration across sectors

4. Proliferate best practices around community-engaged decision-making, participatory budgeting and governance, and open government, and explore how innovations in civic technology can facilitate broader and more equitable engagement

5. Support and expand collaborative efforts to create public spaces

6. Identify and address barriers to voting for all eligible community members; and develop civic education programs to ensure all community members are aware of their rights and opportunities for engaging in public decision-making processes

7. Adopt whole-system thinking, collaborative approaches and long-term investments for "re-connecting" youth; and create community infrastructure around youth well-being, with particular attention to actions addressing inequitable conditions and outcomes