



**UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA**

Social Cohesion Resource for Building Healthy Communities

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Introduction

Why was this resource developed?

Research shows that there are numerous health benefits associated with living in socially cohesive communities. However, there is a lack of resources on how to improve community cohesion, particularly within the specific context of Alberta, Canada. This resource was developed to address this gap by serving as a tool that (a) emphasizes a need to improve community social cohesion and (b) provide ways in which community social cohesion can be strengthened in Alberta.

This resource aims to:

1. Clearly summarize research-informed health benefits associated with living in socially cohesive communities to highlight the importance of strengthening community social cohesion.
2. Provide various actionable strategies that can be implemented to strengthen community social cohesion in Alberta.

Who developed this resource?

The Centre for Healthy Communities' (CHC) Social Cohesion Working Group, which includes: CHC Practice Affiliate members, CHC Scientist members (who are researchers in the School of Public Health [SPH], University of Alberta), and SPH MSc students.

Who is this resource for?

Policy-makers at the municipal and provincial government levels, health promotion practitioners, community development consultants, and community members interested in improving social cohesion.

What is Social Cohesion?

Social cohesion refers to the level of trust and connectedness within a community.





How to Use this Resource

Part 1: The Health Benefits of Social Cohesion

This section highlights key findings from a literature review conducted to identify the health benefits associated with living in socially cohesive communities. Referenced studies can be easily accessed (although some may only be abstracts) through hyperlinks for those interested in learning more about the research that emphasizes the need to strengthen community social cohesion.

Part 2: Strengthening Social Cohesion in Albertan Communities

Users of this resource can choose which strategies to pursue in order to strengthen social cohesion in their community. Please note strategies are not meant to be prescriptive; rather, we encourage users of this resource to pick, adapt, and implement whichever strategies fit their community's respective needs and capacity best.

Each strategy is accompanied by a number of *Ideas to Inspire*, which include potential initiatives that are meant to spark discussions and actions to improve social cohesion within communities. The *Ideas to Inspire* included in this resource were developed through a collaborative process that involved iteratively drawing upon the collective expertise, knowledge, and experience of CHC Practice Affiliates, Scientists, and other CHC affiliated Research Staff.

This resource is supported by a [complementary document](#) that provides more detailed information on each strengthening strategy and contains a number of hyperlinked stories from communities in Alberta to be further inspired by. Please be aware that the linked stories provided are not an exhaustive representation of all possible examples from Alberta. Rather, they are a curated selection of stories the CHC's Social Cohesion Working Group were able to identify.

Part 1: Health Benefits of Social Cohesion

Health Benefits of Social Cohesion - Methods

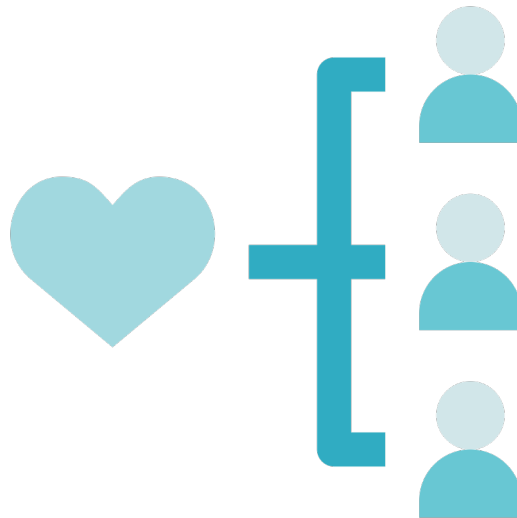
A literature review was conducted to explore the health benefits associated with living in socially cohesive communities. Published articles were identified through a broad search of various electronic databases (e.g., PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar).

An emphasis was placed on reviewing articles that specifically studied the health benefits associated with social cohesion (as opposed to other concepts such as social capital). Studies have been sorted into slides for presentation by overarching themes that emerged inductively from reviewing the literature.

Please note that articles were sourced for content and not critically reviewed for quality.

Social Cohesion is Linked to Better General Health Status

Community members from different age groups and racial backgrounds typically report better self-rated general health when residing in communities where they perceive a strong sense of social cohesion.^{1,2,3}



Social Cohesion Supports Good Mental Health

Across all ages, people who live in communities with strong social cohesion appear to have better mental health outcomes:

- Living in safe neighbourhoods with trusting and positive relationships has been associated with experiencing fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents and young adults.⁴
- Perceived neighbourhood social cohesion has been associated with better psychosocial well-being and lower levels of depression among older adults.⁵

Social cohesion can play a protective role against the negative effects that socioeconomic inequalities and stress have on mental health:

- Residing in a neighbourhood with high social cohesion has been associated with decreased psychological distress among adults with lower socioeconomic status.⁶
- Adolescents who experience stressful life events but live in neighbourhoods with greater social cohesion appear to have better mental health outcomes.⁷

Social Cohesion Promotes Increased Physical Activity

People who live in communities with strong social cohesion are more likely to engage in physical activity and meet recommended guidelines for exercise:

- Social cohesion at both the individual and community levels has been associated with increased physical activity.^{8,9}
- Associations have been found between living in a neighbourhood with strong social cohesion and an increased likelihood of partaking in physical activity across racial and ethnic groups.^{10,11}
- Youth who live in neighbourhoods with greater social cohesion tend to report higher levels of physical activity compared to those living in less socially connected communities.^{12,13}

Social Cohesion Improved Other Health Outcomes

Living in socially cohesive communities has been associated with a range of other positive health outcomes:

- Neighbourhood social cohesion has been positively associated with increased use of preventative health care services, including obtaining influenza vaccinations, cholesterol tests, and mammograms.¹⁴
- Living in a neighbourhood with low social cohesion has been associated with worse sleep outcomes compared to living in a neighbourhood with high social cohesion.¹⁵
- Higher levels of perceived neighbourhood social cohesion has been associated with lower risk of stroke among older adults.¹⁶



Strengthening Social Cohesion in Alberta Communities

How the Strengthening Strategies were Developed

A literature review was conducted to identify information and resources on how to strengthen social cohesion in communities. Reviewed resources included a variety of materials, such as academic articles, community action plans, reports, frameworks, and other related documents ([full list in bibliography](#)).

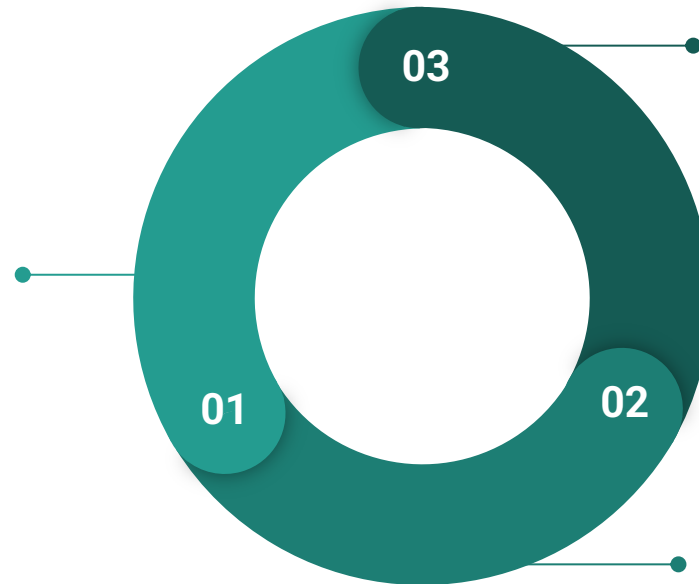
A thematic analysis was performed on the compiled resources to identify common themes related to ways in which social cohesion can be strengthened in communities.

Each strategy in this resource includes a '*What*' subsection introducing the actions to adopt, a '*Why*' subsection explaining the relevance of such actions, and a collection of '*Ideas to Inspire*' which are meant to spark thoughts, discussions, and action within communities. The *Ideas to Inspire* included in this resource were developed by iteratively drawing on the collective expertise, knowledge, and experience of CHC Practice Affiliates, Scientists, and other CHC affiliated Research Staff.

Developing Tools for Evaluating Community Understanding of Social Cohesion

What

Developing ways to evaluate community social cohesion involves creating tools and methodologies to help better understand and assess the degree of social cohesion within a given community.



Ideas to Inspire

- Engage community members in assessing social cohesion
- Provide training opportunities on social cohesion resources
- Use validated scales to measure community social cohesion (see example: Buckner's [Neighbourhood Cohesion Index](#))

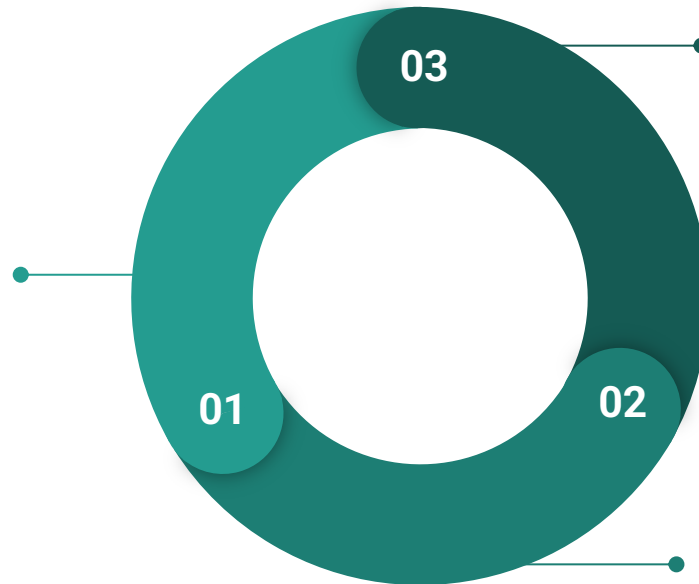
Why

- Promotes Understanding
- Builds Local Capacity
- Supports Evidence-Based Approaches

Build Physical Infrastructure that Facilitates Bridging Between Groups and Bonding Within Groups

What

Developing physical infrastructure that creates opportunities for community members to connect, collaborate, and build relationships can help foster a stronger sense of unity and cohesion within the community.



Ideas to Inspire

- Repurpose derelict and empty spaces into community gardens.
- Create gathering spaces that are safe, intergenerational-friendly, aesthetically pleasing, and culturally appropriate for the specific community.
- Support communities and policy-makers in adapting bylaws and other regulations that enable and encourage such collaborative projects.
- Facilitate the application process for pop-up events in the neighbourhood.

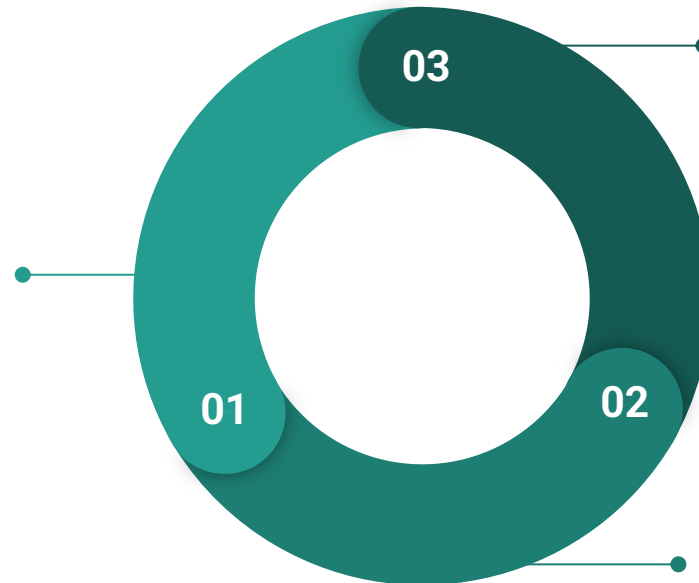
Why

- Builds Relationships and Networks
- Fosters Inclusivity
- Generates Community Pride

Address Larger Issues of Racism, Inequality, and Discrimination

What

By acknowledging and addressing systemic issues that have historically and continue to marginalize certain groups, communities can work towards building a more socially cohesive and equitable community.



Ideas to Inspire

- Meaningfully involve equity denied groups at every step of the cohesion strengthening process.
- Utilize Gender-Based (GBA+) and similar tools when planning community projects.

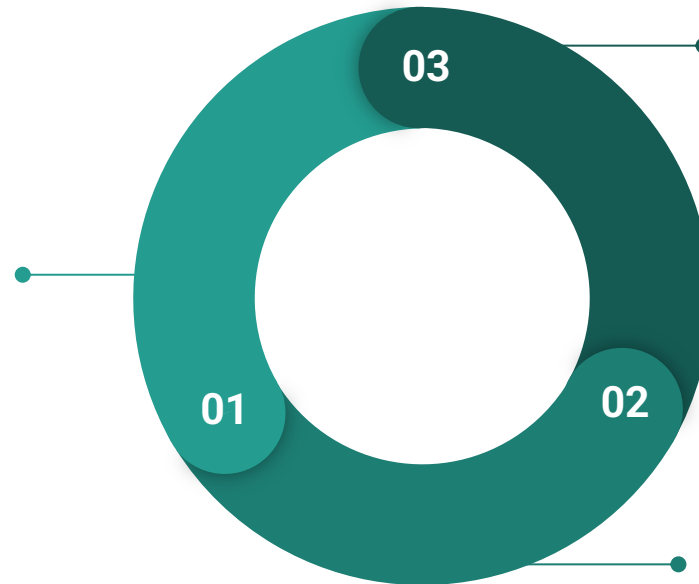
Why

- Promotes Social Justice
- Builds Trust and Unity

Encourage and Support Volunteerism in the Community

What

By actively supporting and encouraging volunteer participation, communities can develop a deeper sense of connection, engagement, and overall social cohesion.



Ideas to Inspire

- Create meaningful volunteer programs that provide training and opportunities for skill development for people of all ages and abilities.
- Review volunteer screening requirements with an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) lens to develop alternate processes that mitigate systemic biases.

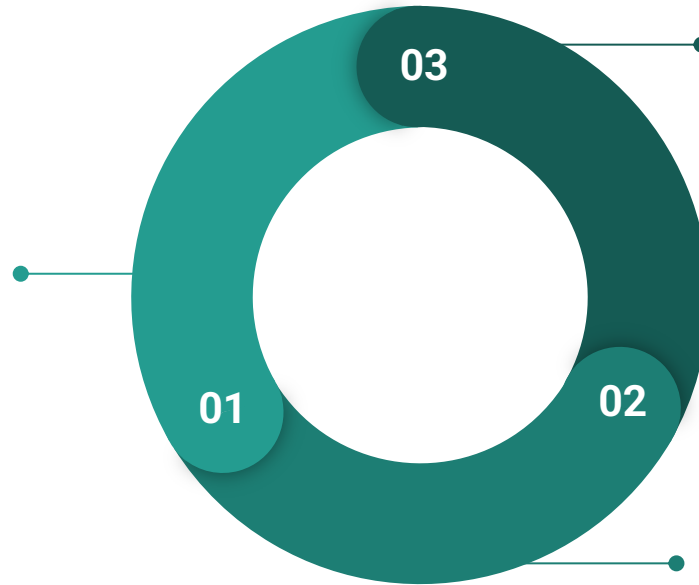
Why

- Addresses Community Needs
- Strengthens Connection to Community

Recognize and Celebrate Local Diversity Through Art, Community Events, and Festivals

What

Recognizing and celebrating local diversity through art, community events, and festivals provides opportunities for community members of different backgrounds to come together, share their traditions, and learn from one another.



Ideas to Inspire

- Provide funding for local heritage organizations to share their social values, traditions, and foods with a larger community audience.
- Promote cultural participation through events on artworks from different local generations and descendants from other cultures.

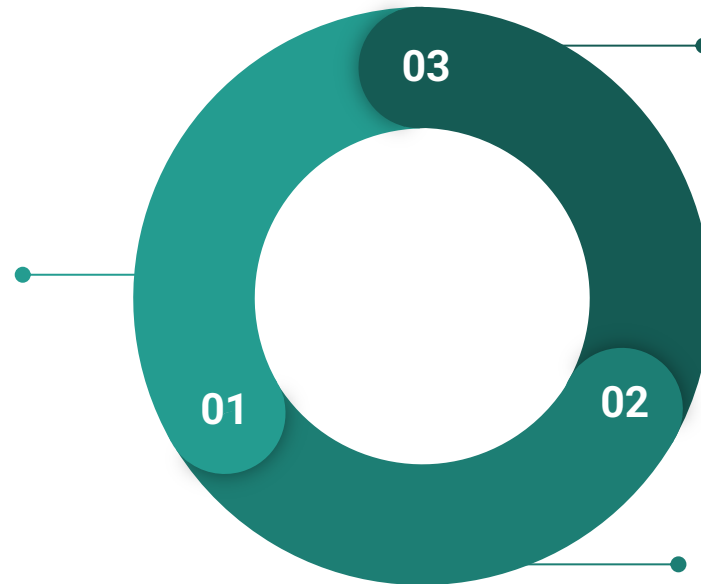
Why

- Promotes Understanding & Respect

Grow Community-Led Organizations and Collaborative Local Leadership

What

Growing collaborative local leadership and community-led organizations strengthens social cohesion by enhancing capacity for community-driven problem-solving and decision-making.



Ideas to Inspire

- Support community leaders and organizations in hosting gatherings that bring community members together to identify solutions to communal challenges.
- Share successful stories of work done by local community leaders and organizations through local news and social media.

Why

- Fosters Community Cooperation
- Empowers Local Voices

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