



# **Systems Of Cross-sector Integration and Action across the Lifespan (SOCIAL) Framework Report**

**Executive Summary**

**Spring 2024**



# Executive Summary

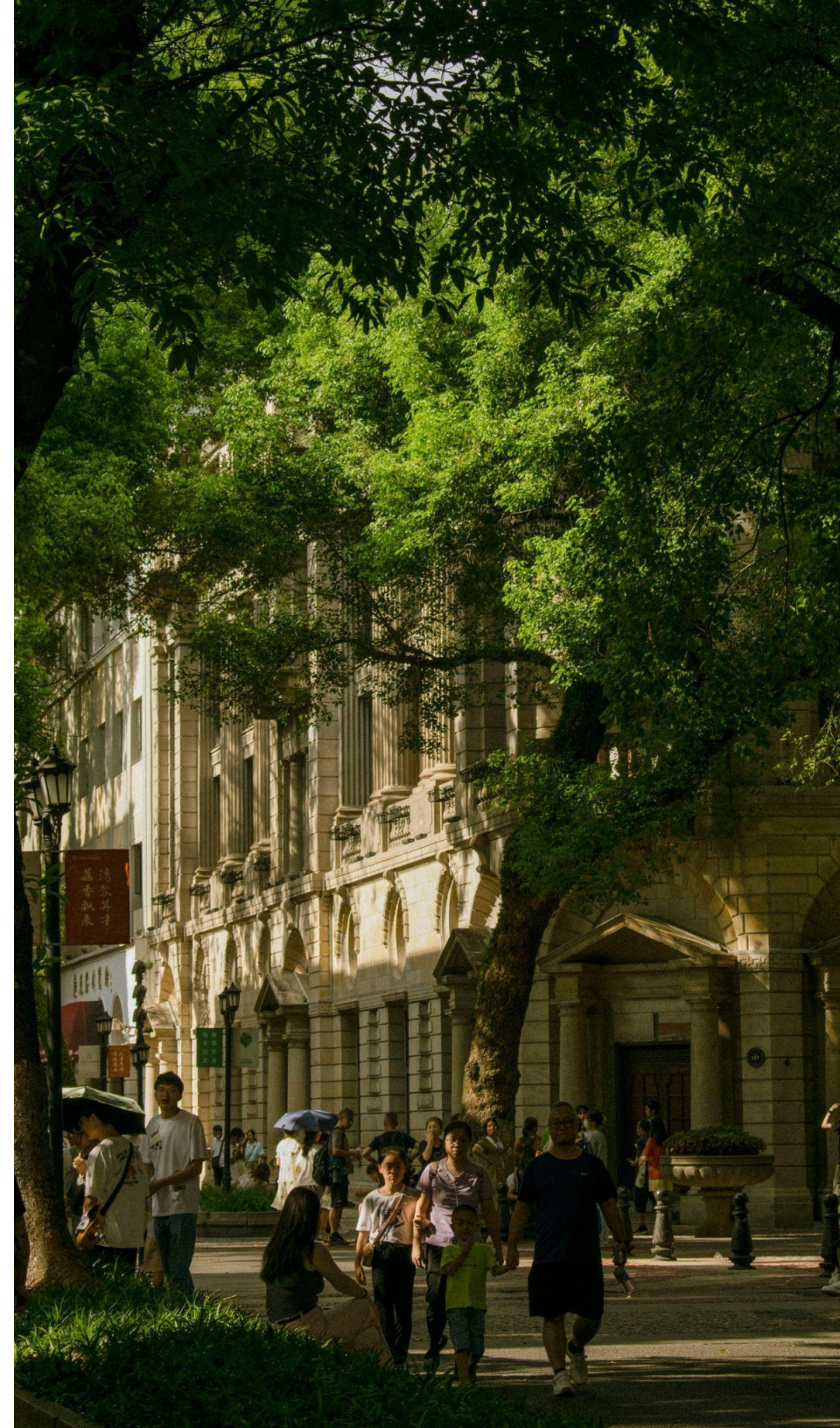
Human beings are fundamentally social by nature. Substantial evidence documents the benefits of stronger social connections and the risks of disconnection (e.g., social isolation and loneliness) for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.<sup>(1-5)</sup> Much of this research and work has historically been conducted in siloes, making it challenging to develop a cohesive, systematic approach to promoting social connection.\*

In this report, we explore the influence of the built environment on social connection, focusing on the intersection of the transportation, housing, and environmental sectors – where each pillar works in sync. We underscore the importance of every stakeholder in shaping our shared environment and facilitating spaces that connect and foster belonging. Through this report, we invite the question: **What role can we all play in the vision of using the built environment to foster social connection?**

Within this report, you will find a deep dive into evidence-based and promising interventions, with policy highlights and community examples showcased throughout. We present untapped policy opportunities, important considerations, and research gaps to further explore. As architects, city and regional planners, local leaders, engaged citizens, and many more roles, we extend an invitation to you to reimagine our spaces, our communities, and how we can cultivate more resilient cultures of connection through the built environment.

To read the full report and offer feedback, please visit our website [here](#).

*\* To learn how the Foundation for Social Connection is bridging these siloes and advancing social connection in every sector of society and across the lifespan, learn about our SOCIAL Framework [here](#).*





## **Making the Case: Why Should the Built Environment Address Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Connection?**

The built environment can be both a driver of and a barrier to social connection.<sup>(6)</sup> It can enable the facilitation of meaningful interactions and foster a sense of community or, conversely, isolate individuals and discourage engagement. Even the smallest points of social connection, like small exchanges as someone walks by on the sidewalk or brief interactions in the supermarket or neighborhood café, can build a feeling of mutual trust, foster empathy, and generate more social capital in the broader community.<sup>(7-10)</sup> When designed well, neighborhoods and community environments can be fundamentally more supportive of social connection and serve as a preventative measure to avoid loneliness and minimize social isolation.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **Significance: Impact of the Built Environment**

Research highlights the critical role of well-designed, intentional, and inclusive spaces in addressing social isolation, loneliness, and connection (SILC). Some of the key outcomes the built environment has on addressing SILC include:

- Increased social capital through the design and amenities of the built environment and the roles it plays in shaping the types and quality of social ties within a community.<sup>(12)</sup>
- Increased diversity in the types of interactions and relationships an individual has access to - key to the social fabric of communities and individual health.<sup>(13-14)</sup>
- Increased belonging and sense of place through built environments rich in community-based programming - leading individuals to more readily use services and contribute their time and resources back into their communities.<sup>(15; 19-20)</sup>
- Improvements in social health markers (inclusive of trust, network size, and perceived safety) through various characteristics of the built environment.<sup>(16)</sup>
- Increased civic engagement, community resilience, and preparedness through community-level social connection.<sup>(17-18)</sup>

# Promising Strategies for Addressing SILC Through the Built Environment

The first nine (9) strategies explore the creation and operation of spaces and places that foster social connection within the built environment. The last four (4) strategies explore the implementation or “how” behind the work. These strategies look at the power of collective impact, co-creation, and multi solving solutions.

## Strategies for Addressing SILC within the Built Environment

Strategy	Level(s) of Influence	Social Connection Outcomes
<b>Design places to support comfort and connection</b>		Social capital, sense of community, belonging
<b>Create third places that facilitate natural opportunities for connection</b>		Social capital, social cohesion, neighboring
<b>Invest in multi-use public spaces that foster social connection and nature connection</b>		Social capital, social cohesion, sense of community, neighborhood cohesion, reduced feelings of loneliness
<b>Build intergenerational and age-friendly communities</b>		Social capital, social cohesion, bonding, reduced loneliness
<b>Use and encourage shared community housing models</b>		Social capital, sense of community, belonging, neighborhood trust, bonding
<b>Increase access to affordable, reliable public transportation</b>		Social capital, social engagement, reduced isolation, social ties, sense of place
<b>Activate streets as places for connection</b>		Social capital, social cohesion, sense of community, neighborhood trust
<b>Reform local zoning codes and policies to allow for shared- or mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods</b>		Social capital, social cohesion, sense of community, neighborhood trust, reduced isolation
<b>Expand accessibility, reliability, and affordability for broadband connectivity</b>		Social capital, reduced isolation, social support
<b>Seek solutions for enhancing the built environment in partnership with community members</b>		Social cohesion, community engagement
<b>Invest in neighborhood associations that are led by residents and community members</b>		Social cohesion, community engagement, sense of place
<b>Facilitate cross-boundary collaboration, partnership, and investments</b>		Sense of place, community engagement
<b>Implement certification programs and provide technical assistance and resources to support the evaluation of innovative, impactful, and sustainable use of space</b>		Sense of place



## **Cross-Cutting Themes**

*Considerations for ensuring inclusivity in the development, research, and implementation of approaches.*

### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, Justice, and Accessibility (DEIBJA)**

- In what ways do our current built environments perpetuate harmful societal norms and practices?
- What steps can we take in the design and planning process to confront and address existing prejudices?
- How can we ensure that accessibility is a fundamental aspect of the initial design process?

### **Experience of the Built Environment Across the Lifespan**

- How do we anticipate and plan for the changing physical and social needs of individuals within the built environment through functional, welcoming, and supportive spaces?
- How can planning and design evolve to support "aging in place," enabling individuals to stay in their preferred communities for life?

### **Application of Solutions Across Geographic Types (e.g., rural, urban)**

- How can the principles of inclusive and equitable design be effectively scaled to suit the unique needs and contexts of diverse environments - remaining locally relevant and globally informed?
- In what ways can the scalability of solutions be evaluated to ensure they can be adapted and applied to different contexts without losing their effectiveness or cultural relevance?

## Conclusion

The built environment is more than just a background to our day-to-day. It is a key player in fostering vibrant, socially connected communities. A well-designed built environment can foster social connection, promote a sense of belonging, and promote civic engagement while poorly designed spaces hinder social cohesion and exacerbate social isolation. Strategies focused on promoting and strengthening social connection and reducing social isolation and loneliness throughout the built environment hold tremendous promise in building environments that connect. Researchers, architects, city/ regional planners, community leaders, and other stakeholders have worked hard to pioneer these evidence-based solutions and forge a path toward a more socially connected future. While this evidence demonstrates significant promise, the gaps within the research and the limited scope of some evidence-based programs also suggest untapped opportunities to accelerate progress.

## We need your input!

We would love to learn how you plan to act upon the insights you gain from this report. Please share more by completing this brief form.

[Provide Feedback](#)

## Connect with us

Website: [www.social-connection.org](http://www.social-connection.org)

LinkedIn: [The Foundation for Social Connection](#)

Twitter: [@fdn4sociconnect](#)

Instagram: [@fdnsocialconnection](#)

Join our mailing list [here!](#)



# References

1. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Baker M, Harris T, Stephenson D. Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Perspect Psychol Sci*. 2015;10(2):227-237. doi:10.1177/1745691614568352
2. Pinquart M, Duberstein PR. Associations of social networks with cancer mortality: A meta-analysis. *Crit Rev Oncol Hematol*. 2010;75(2):122-137. doi:10.1016/j.critrevonc.2009.06.003
3. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. Brayne C, ed. *PLoS Med*. 2010;7(7):e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316
4. Zalta AK, Tirone V, Orlowska D, et al. Examining moderators of the relationship between social support and self-reported PTSD symptoms: A meta-analysis. *Psychol Bull*. 2021;147(1):33-54. doi:10.1037/bul0000316
5. Lyyra TM, Heikkinen RL. Perceived Social Support and Mortality in Older People. *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci*. 2006;61(3):S147-S152. doi:10.1093/geronb/61.3.S147
6. Bower, M., Kent, J. L., Patulny, R., Green, O., McGrath, L., Teesson, L., Jamalshahni, T., Sandison, H., & Rugel, E. J. (2023). The impact of the built environment on loneliness: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Health & Place*, 79, 102962. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102962>
7. Riess H. The Science of Empathy. *Journal of Patient Experience*. 2017;4(2):74-77.
8. Hu T, Zheng X, Huang M. Absence and Presence of Human Interaction: The Relationship Between Loneliness and Empathy. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2020;11.
9. Putnam RD. Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. In: Crothers L, Lockhart C, eds. *Culture and Politics: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US; 2000:223-234.
10. Hunt V, Layton, D., Prince, S., Why diversity matters. McKinsey&Company; 2015.
11. Hyypä M. Healthy ties: Social capital, population health and survival. 2010.
12. Cabrera, J. F., & Najarian, J. C. (2015). How the built environment shapes spatial bridging ties and social capital. *Environment and Behavior*, 47(3), 239–267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916513500275>
13. Ali, T., Nilsson, C. J., Weuve, J., Rajan, K. B., and de Leon, C. F. M. (2018). Effects of social network diversity on mortality, cognition and physical function in the elderly: a longitudinal analysis of the Chicago Health and Aging Project (CHAP). *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 72(11), 990-996.
14. Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
15. United States. Public Health Service. Office of the Surgeon General.: (2023, May) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community
16. Peavey, E. (2020). *Connecting IRL: The antidote to loneliness*. HKS, Inc.
17. National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine (NASEM). *Enhancing Community Resilience through Social Capital and Connectedness: Stronger Together!* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2021.
18. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response. *Community Resilience*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/abc/Pages/community-resilience.aspx>. Published 2015.
19. Riess H. The Science of Empathy. *Journal of Patient Experience*. 2017;4(2):74-77.
20. Hu T, Zheng X, Huang M. Absence and Presence of Human Interaction: The Relationship Between Loneliness and Empathy. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2020;11.