



Why America Needs a Strong Civic Commons

Reimagining
the Civic Commons



A Remedy for Loneliness

Gathering spaces like parks, libraries and neighborhood main streets are an antidote to loneliness. When communities have more spaces to gather, people have more close friends and an easier time forming new social bonds. These bonds are essential, but access to the places that kick start them is unequal: Americans without a college degree have fewer public spaces and less active social and civic networks in their communities.

Source: Cox, D., & Pressler, S. [Survey Center on American Life](#).

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Trust in Others

Spending time with people from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds bolsters trust. In a time when nearly two-thirds of Americans believe trust in other people is declining—and say that this deficit of trust makes it harder to solve our country's problems—the power of public spaces to bring diverse people together makes them key to building a more hopeful future.

Sources: Glaeser, E. Triumph of the City. Rainie, L., et al. Pew Research Center.



Bridging Economic Divides

When people socialize across economic divides, social mobility grows. Kids who grow up in poverty but have friends from diverse economic backgrounds are more likely to move into the middle class. As more and more Americans live, work and socialize with others who have similar incomes, nurturing cross-class connections is crucial. Public spaces designed and programmed to encourage interaction among diverse people are part of the answer.

Source: Miller, C. C., et al. [The New York Times](#).



Climate Resilience

Communities with strong social infrastructure—the places and organizations that generate social capital—are more resilient during extreme weather events like heat waves. Neighborhoods with robust collections of assets like parks, playgrounds, libraries, local diners and block clubs have lower death rates during extreme heat. When casual interactions are a feature of everyday life, relationships flourish and communities are safer and healthier.

Source: Klinenberg, E. Palaces for the People.

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Robust Local Economies

The formerly industrial Midwest is a patchwork of towns experiencing mixed fortunes. Some thrive economically, while others languish. What sets the success stories apart? It's not traditional economic tools like tax incentives but thoughtful investments in quality of life and place, such as public spaces and cultural activities. These civic assets attract people and companies and help them feel at home, encouraging them to stay.

Sources: Austin, J. C., et al. Brookings. Scott, M. M., et al. Knight Foundation and Urban Institute.

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The Company of Strangers

From walking with friends at a park to chatting with a neighbor at a street fair, public spaces encourage interaction. Even seemingly trivial interactions—like moving in sync with strangers at a yoga class or singing with a large group—are linked to greater happiness, health and civic participation. Known as weak connections, these interactions can boost our mood even more than socializing with family and close friends.

Sources: Span, P. The New York Times. Zaraska, M. Scientific American.

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Community Safety

Violent crime tends to concentrate in small, specific places, such as a few blocks in a few disinvested neighborhoods. Adding high-quality amenities like trees and parks in these areas can decrease crime immensely. In Philadelphia, efforts to transform and clean vacant lots in high-poverty neighborhoods led to a 29% reduction in gun violence.

Sources: Love, H. Brookings. Branas, C. C., et al. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

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A Stronger Democracy

As fewer people engage with local civic life and social isolation grows, American democracy has weakened. But civic spaces like libraries and public markets offer avenues to get involved in community life. In these shared places, Americans encounter people different from themselves and develop practical skills—like cooperation and listening to diverse viewpoints—essential to democratic citizenship and the common good.

Sources: Pressler, S. [Connective Tissue](#). American Academy of Arts & Sciences. [Our Common Purpose](#).

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