

Building community is good for you!
Social inclusion and self-perceived health

Social Inclusion, an important determinant of community well-being, has recently been linked to improved perceptions of health in Canada. Social inclusion refers to the sense of belonging within any given community, the level of trust and respect between community members, and the degree of participation in community life. Social inclusion, when present, ensures that all individuals and groups are able to participate fully in community life. It includes active social supports, especially for those in crisis, and opportunities for everyone to contribute.

Social Inclusion is important because it improves quality of life. We can make our communities safer and healthier simply by building relationships of reciprocity, trust, and good will between neighbours. Participation in social activities, creating a sense of identity in a neighbourhood, and getting to know one another all create mutual respect between community members and make us accountable to one another. Social Inclusion reduces feelings of isolation and improves people's perception of their own health. A recent Statistics Canada study has shown that people's self-reported sense of belonging in their community positively correlates to their self-perception of health.⁽¹⁾ Together with other recent research on social capital and income inequality we can confidently say that building community improves the individual lives of community members.

Statistics Canada's recent article entitled "Community belonging and self-perceived health" by: Margot Shields, discusses the conclusions of

the Canadian Community Health Survey which includes a question on community belonging⁽²⁾ The survey finds that most Canadians feel a strong sense of belonging in their community.⁽³⁾ Rural and remote communities are more likely to report a strong sense of community than large urban centers, with Atlantic Canada and the Territories reporting the highest sense of community belonging.⁽⁴⁾ However, 26% of Canadians report a weak sense on community belonging, 10% very weak.⁽⁵⁾

Other interesting findings include; people who own homes, people who are married or common-law, and people reporting higher incomes all report a stronger sense of belonging.⁽⁶⁾ This is logical because these people have the most opportunity, time and money to participate in community life. The key to true social inclusion will be to build communities where everyone is provided with the opportunity to participate and contribute to the community.

Those individuals who report a strong sense of community belonging also report excellent or very good health; the same is true of mental health.⁽⁷⁾ These findings are consistent with many studies that link social inclusion, or social capital to perceptions of health. "Community belonging and self-perceived health" hypothesizes that feeling connected to one's community includes experiencing relationships of mutual respect which could increase self-esteem, and that interaction among community members can result in the transmission of social norms related to health.⁽⁸⁾ For example: children and adults who participate in recreational activities in the community learn about health and fitness and develop healthy habits and hobbies.

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Likewise, most activities that involve community participation, including learning new skills or volunteering, exclude unhealthy behaviours like smoking, or drinking.

Social inclusion is a positive element of human society regardless of country or culture. In Chile, a study of four low-income neighbourhoods found that the two neighbourhoods that reported stronger elements of social capital (including perceived trust in neighbours and organizations, reciprocity between neighbours, and integration and social participation) also reported better self-perceptions of health.⁽⁹⁾ In the United States studies have found that a lack of social capital and social trust is associated with higher levels of violence, and that neighbourhoods with greater social capital experience less violence and crime.⁽¹⁰⁾

United Way of Regina is committed to building strong, inclusive communities. From early childhood development, to immigrant settlement, to block by block revitalization of our most vulnerable neighbourhoods our funded partners and work diligently to support all families to succeed.

To access the Statistics Canada resource, “Community belonging and self-perceived health”, discussed in this article please click here:

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2008002/article/10552-eng.htm>

Endnotes

1. Margot Shields (June 2008) “Community belonging and self-perceived health”, Statistics Canada; Health Reports. [Online] Available: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2008002/article/10552-eng.htm>
2. Canadian Community Health Survey, available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-bin/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=3226&lang=en&db=imdb&adm=8&dis=2>
3. Ibid, Shields
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. M Aracena, C Berrocal, et al. “Social Capital and self-rated health in urban low income neighbourhoods in Chile” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 62 (2008): 790-792
10. L Karpati, BP Kennedy et al. “Social capital, and violence in the United States, 1974 – 1993.”, *Journal of Social Science Medicine* 55 (2002).