

Evidence Brief

Characteristics of a Healthy Community

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "healthy communities," "community," "neighbourhood," "effects," "health," "characteristics," "social determinants," and "best practices."

Key Terms: What is a 'healthy' community?

There is some disagreement about what constitutes a 'healthy' community.

First, there are many ways to define 'community' and to delineate a community's geographic borders.

The term 'community health' can measure the wellbeing of the community as a whole or the wellbeing of individual community members.

Proponents of the **Healthy Communities movement** focus on the **wellbeing of the community as a whole**. They emphasize tenets such as empowerment, community-driven change, and the social determinants of health (Health Resources in Action, 2013).

However, healthy communities can also be understood in terms of **individual health outcomes**, using indicators such as self-rated health, rates of mental health 'disorders,' and Body Mass Index (BMI). Conceptualizing community health in this way allows for measurement and comparison.

Summary of Evidence: Community Characteristics and Health Outcomes

1. Studies of '**neighbourhood effects**' inform our understanding of how **where** we live affects our health. A growing body of evidence reveals a connection between community or neighbourhood characteristics (e.g. crime, violence, social cohesion) and health outcomes (e.g. rates of depression, anxiety, self-rated health, BMI).
2. There is a positive association between **community social cohesion** and mental wellbeing, especially for older adults (Elliott et al., 2014; Klijs et al., 2017; O'Campo et al., 2015;

Poortinga, 2012; Ziersch et al., 2005). Social cohesion measures a sense of connection to a community and the involvement and trust between its members. There is evidence that the positive effects hold for children (Drukker et al., 2003) and adolescents (Aminzadeh et al., 2013).

3. Research shows that **neighbourhood social ‘disorders’** (such as crime, violence, and incivilities) are associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety (Joshi et al., 2017; Kim, 2008; O’Campo et al., 2015). A large-scale study conducted in Toronto also found that neighbourhood ‘problems’ are related to worse general health outcomes and a higher BMI (O’Campo et al., 2015).
4. The effects of social cohesion and social disorder on health suggest the **importance of social skills and networks** in building healthy communities. Youth programs should emphasize teamwork, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Strive to create a welcoming atmosphere and foster a sense of community. Consider working with community members to create a grassroots vision of a ‘healthy’ community – and work together to make it a reality.

References

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