Foundation for Social Connection

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

Food and Nutrition Executive Summary

Spring 2025

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., isolation and loneliness) for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.[1-5] Research on social connection spans multiple scientific disciplines including medicine, sociology, evolutionary biology, psychology, epidemiology, neuroscience, communication, and anthropology. Much of this research is historically conducted in siloes and relies on a wide range of research methods, which makes it challenging to develop a cohesive, systematic approach to promoting social connection.

The Foundation for Social Connection's Scientific Leadership Council, chaired by Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, developed **The Systems Of Cross-sector Integration and Action across the Lifespan (SOCIAL) Framework** to translate research into practice, accelerating progress toward a society that contributes to social connectedness across the lifespan.[6] The SOCIAL Framework draws upon the hybrid relationship of the (a) socio-ecological model and the (b) Health in All Policy (HiAP) Framework to illustrate how every sector of society and level of influence[7-8] can contribute to social connection and reduce social isolation and loneliness.[6,9-10]

This report explores opportunities to foster social connection through food and nutrition, which encompasses the full range of systems, environments, programs, and policies involved in the growing, processing, distribution, marketing, preparation, consumption, and disposal of food. The focus is on how these elements—when designed intentionally—can be leveraged to reduce social isolation and loneliness, and to strengthen social bonds across diverse settings and populations.

In line with the Foundation's previous SOCIAL Framework reports, this report identifies key stakeholders and promising strategies for fostering social connectedness at various points in food systems. The report

examines how food and nutrition-based strategies can operate across the five socio-ecological levels of influence: individual, interpersonal, institutional/organizational, community, and societal. By the end of this report, readers will be equipped with specific examples, implementation approaches, and framing language to support research, practice, and investment in social connection within food and nutrition.

After reading this report, you will be able to:

- **Describe and understand the power of food systems as interconnected stakeholders, environments, and processes that shape our lives**—including how food is produced, distributed, prepared, and consumed across institutional, community, and informal settings. This includes recognizing how these systems intersect with cultural norms, social infrastructure, and public health goals.

- **Identify how food and nutrition can either support or hinder opportunities for social connection**—from the accessibility of food programs, to policies that shape where and how people gather around food.

- **Apply and learn from promising strategies and examples for increasing social connectedness through food-related built environments**—across multiple levels of influence (individual, interpersonal, institutional/organizational, community, and societal) and tailored to the roles of various stakeholders, including public agencies, community-based organizations, and practitioners.

Making the Case: How Do Food and Nutrition Address Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Connection (SILC)?

It is often the case that when we gathers with others around food, conversation flows and we find ourselves sharing stories, information, and maybe even laughter. Research shows how meals are not merely about sustenance but also serve as bridges for building relationships. For example, communal dining experiences like community meals and food-based events can significantly social bonds through opportunities for communication, creativity, and collaboration.[11] A study from the University of Oxford found that individuals who share meals with others more regularly report feeling happier and more satisfied with their lives, increasing social bonds and facilitating deeper feelings of belonging within their community.[12] Access to culturally relevant and nutritious food fosters a sense of belonging, strengthens identity, and contributes to overall well-being.[13]

Research suggests that food systems can meaningfully address SILC in a variety of ways. By creating opportunities for shared meals, community-driven food programs, and learning about healthy eating, food and nutrition can be drivers for social connection and community well-being. Some social connection outcomes include:

- **Reduced feelings of social isolation and enhanced social cohesion** along with increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables through community gardening initiatives.[14 15]
- **Consistent social contact and reduced loneliness** through meal delivery programs for homebound older adults.[16]
- **Reduced social isolation and increased social capital** through community kitchens that can also help to address food insecurity.[17]
- **Increased sense of belonging and reduced stigma** among youth through school lunches.[18]
- **Higher levels of social cohesion and trust** among low-income families experiencing food insecurity through sharing and referring to resources.[19]

Cross-Cutting Considerations

This section in the report provides cross-cutting themes, perspectives, and reflection prompts to consider when developing, researching, and implementing approaches.

Increasing Access to Food and Nutrition
- Which groups in society have the least access to healthy, affordable food?
- How can we bridge the gap between food insecurity and food surplus in the US?
- Who from our communities could teach us about food and nutrition?

Food and Nutrition Across the Lifespan
- How can we bring together different generations over food?
- How can the need to understand nutritional needs in different stages of life (childhood, adulthood, old age, etc.) serve as an educational opportunity that brings people together?

Application of Solutions Across Geographic Types (e.g., rural, urban, suburban)
- What assets and opportunities exist in your particular geographic type in the context of food and nutrition?
- How well-connected are various stakeholders in your community, both in terms of relationships and physical connectivity?

Promising Strategies for Addressing SILC Through Food and Nutrition

The first six (6) strategies explore how food and nutrition can foster social connection. 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 multisolving.

Strategies for Addressing SILC Through Food and Nutrition

Level(s) of Influence icons: Individual · Interpersonal · Community/Organizational · Network · Societal (active = filled/blue)

Strategy	Level(s) of Influence (Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Network, Societal)	Social Connection Outcomes
Bring people together to cook and eat food.	✓ Individual, ✓ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✗ Societal	Social capital, sense of community, belonging, reduced loneliness
Establish and support community gardens.	✗ Individual, ✓ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✗ Societal	Social capital, social cohesion, sense of community, belonging, social connection
Set up and activate farmers markets.	✗ Individual, ✗ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✓ Societal	Social capital, social cohesion, sense of community, belonging, social connection
Leverage meal delivery programs as opportunities for connection.	✓ Individual, ✓ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✗ Network, ✓ Societal	Social connection, reduced social isolation, reduced loneliness
Create and sustain community supported agriculture (CSA) programs.	✗ Individual, ✓ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✓ Societal	Social capital, social connection
Integrate food festivals into annual community engagement efforts.	✗ Individual, ✗ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✗ Societal	Social capital, sense of community, social cohesion

Making it Happen: How to Implement Strategies Effectively

Strategy	Level(s) of Influence (Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Network, Societal)
Provide opportunities for volunteering and mutual aid throughout the food system.	✓ Individual, ✓ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✓ Societal
Design for opportunities to connect through food in the built environment.	✗ Individual, ✗ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✗ Societal
Establish cross-sectoral partnerships that bring together various components of the food system.	✗ Individual, ✗ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✓ Societal
Promote policies that provide funding for food and nutrition-based initiatives, ensuring sustainable access to healthy foods.	✗ Individual, ✗ Interpersonal, ✓ Community, ✓ Network, ✓ Societal

Table 1: Strategies for Addressing SILC Through Food and Nutrition

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Gaps and Implications for Research

While there is a moderately sized body of literature on the role that food and nutrition can play in addressing social isolation, loneliness, and connection (SILC), there remain gaps in demographics and as new trends emerge. The following is an inexhaustive list of areas for further research, which can help deepen our understanding of what strategies are most effective and if/how societal shifts exacerbate social isolation and/or loneliness.

- What is the effectiveness of private sector actors nudging consumers towards connection when purchasing or ordering food?
- What are the impacts of diet culture—which can be impacted by the recent proliferation of semaglutide medications (e.g., Ozempic)—on social eating?
- What is the direction of the relationship between food and social isolation/loneliness?
- What is the relationship between food and nutrition and social isolation/loneliness among children/adolescents?

Conclusion

With the right recipes for success, we can amplify the roles that food and nutrition have to play in bringing us together. From volunteers delivering meals to older adults, to neighbors planting seeds alongside each other in community gardens, we can all shape our food systems to be more relational, accessible, and sustainable for everyone.

Read Full Report   **Provide Feedback**

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