



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

Arts, Culture, and Leisure Executive Summary

Spring 2026

# 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.<sup>(1-5)</sup> 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.<sup>(6)</sup> 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<sup>(7-8)</sup> can contribute to social connection and reduce social isolation and loneliness.<sup>(6,9-10)</sup>

This report explores opportunities to foster social connection through the arts, culture, and leisure sectors, which encompass the full range of systems, spaces, creative practices, cultural traditions, programs, and policies that influence how people access and participate in arts, cultural life, and leisure. In this report, we examine how culture shapes and informs shared meaning, identity, and belonging; how arts, culture, and leisure provide avenues for expression and collective experience; and how leisure functions as an active social process that generates recurring interaction, shared rituals, and voluntary association—creating settings where relationships, social norms, and identities are formed and reinforced through ongoing participation. Together, we examine how these domains, through both intentional design and investment as well as grassroots, community-driven practices and everyday participation, can influence how people relate to one another, experience belonging, and connect across differences.





In line with the Foundation’s previous SOCIAL Framework reports, we discuss key stakeholders and promising strategies for fostering social connectedness and addressing social isolation and loneliness through the design, planning, policy, and use of the arts, culture, and leisure sectors. By the conclusion of this report, readers will be equipped with language, examples, and strategies to support efforts to strengthen social connection within the arts, culture, and leisure sectors.

### **After reading this report, you will be able to:**

- **Describe and understand** arts, culture, and leisure as interconnected systems, spaces, and practices that shape social life, including how individuals and communities access, experience, and participate across institutional, communal, and informal settings.
- **Identify** how arts, culture, and leisure opportunities can either support or hinder social connection – from barriers to access, representation, and inclusion to funding structure, program design, and policy.
- **Apply** promising strategies and examples for increasing social connectedness through arts, culture, and leisure – across multiple levels of influence (individual, interpersonal, institutional/organizational, community, and societal) and tailored roles of various stakeholders, including public health agencies, community-based organizations, and practitioners.

### **Making the Case: How Do Arts, Culture, and Leisure Address Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Connection (SILC)?**

Research indicates the profound potential of the arts, culture, and leisure to address social isolation, loneliness, and connection (SILC) through inclusive, accessible, and community-driven initiatives. It suggests arts, culture, and leisure initiatives are most effective when they create recurring opportunities

for meaningful participation, shared purpose, and interaction across differences. Examples of positive outcomes include:

- **Strengthened social cohesion and trust** through participation in art-based activities that foster connections among diverse groups and reinforce shared values.<sup>(12,14)</sup>
- **Increased sense of belonging and reduced stigma** among marginalized groups through public cultural programs that provide free or low-cost access to arts and leisure.<sup>(13)</sup>
- **Stronger intergenerational relationships** via cultural initiatives such as storytelling festivals or collaborative art projects that bring together people of all ages, promoting mutual understanding and support.<sup>(11)</sup>
- **Improved community ties and expanded social networks** through adaptive sports programs, fostering a sense of inclusion and mutual support among participants.<sup>(15)</sup>
- **Reduced feelings of loneliness and enhanced social bonds** through increased opportunities for cultural exchange and connection through participatory online art experiences.<sup>(16)</sup>

It is important to note that emerging research also indicates that arts, culture, and leisure initiatives do not automatically produce positive social outcomes, and in some contexts, may reinforce existing inequities or barriers to participation. Impact is often dependent on the design, access, continuity, cultural relevance, and the extent to which initiatives foster genuine interaction and reciprocity. Examples of unintended outcomes include:

- **Increased risk of social exclusion** when barriers such as cost, transportation, or perceived belonging limit marginalized communities' access to and participation in social life.<sup>(17)</sup>
- **Limited or inconsistent impact on loneliness** when arts participation lacks meaningful opportunities for connection and relationship-building.<sup>(18)</sup>
- **Unequal participation patterns** shaped by socioeconomic factors that may limit who benefits from different opportunities and contribute to disparities in outcomes.<sup>(19)</sup>
- **Limited access to culturally rooted arts opportunities**, which can deepen feelings of alienation or tokenism and constrain the potential for genuine social connection.<sup>(20)</sup>





# Cross-Cutting Considerations

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

## Ensuring Access to Arts, Culture, and Leisure for All

- Where do barriers limit equitable access to arts, culture, and leisure, and how can they be reduced?
- How can arts, culture, and leisure experiences more intentionally foster belonging across diverse communities?
- How should digital and in-person engagement be balanced to strengthen social connection?

## Arts, Culture, and Leisure Across the Lifespan

- How are arts, culture, and leisure opportunities intentionally designed to support connection at different life stages?
- Where are there gaps in sustained, developmentally-appropriate engagement opportunities that help people stay socially connected over time?
- How can shared, culturally meaningful experiences be strengthened to foster belonging across generations?

# Promising Strategies for Addressing SILC Through Arts, Culture, and Leisure

This table provides an overview of strategies to address social isolation and loneliness and foster social connection within the arts, culture, and leisure sectors. It presents the levels of influence for each strategy and the associated social connection outcomes it addresses.






| Strategies for Addressing SILC Within the Arts, Culture, and Leisure Sectors  |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Strategy  | Level(s) of Influence  | Social Connection Outcomes   |
| <b>Lower barriers and expand equitable opportunities for meaningful participation in arts, culture, and leisure.</b>  |    | Reduced loneliness, reduced isolation, belonging, social support                                 |
| <b>Embed participatory arts and group-based leisure opportunities within community-serving institutions and public systems, while recognizing the complementary role of specialized therapeutic approaches where appropriate.</b> |    | Social capital, reduced loneliness, belonging  |
| <b>Embed arts education, leisure, and play-based learning across formal, nonformal, and informal education settings.</b>  |    | Social capital, belonging, sense of community, bonding   |
| <b>Establish and sustain community hubs dedicated to arts, culture, and leisure.</b>  |   | Social capital, social cohesion, belonging, sense of community, place attachment, social support |
| <b>Include arts, culture, and leisure in placemaking efforts to prioritize recurring interaction and inclusive gatherings.</b>  |  | Social capital, social cohesion, belonging, sense of community, trust                            |
| <b>Recognize arts, culture, and leisure as core components of social infrastructure in policy, planning, and funding decisions.</b>   |  | Social cohesion, reduced loneliness, belonging, sense of community, social support               |
| <b>Create enabling environments for low-barrier, recurring community participation in arts, culture, and leisure.</b>   |  | Social cohesion, belonging, place attachment, trust  |

Table 1: Strategies for Addressing SILC Within the Arts, Culture, and Leisure Sectors

# Making it Happen: How to Implement Strategies Effectively

This section of the report explores the “how” of effectively implementing strategies to advance social connection in the arts, culture, and leisure sectors. This includes considering ways to elevate diverse perspectives through collective impact strategies and exploring how to address multiple issues with a single solution.

The following practices can contextualize the strategies previously shared and help begin to connect the dots across multiple areas of impact.

| Strategies for Addressing SILC within the Arts, Culture, and Leisure Sectors   |   |
|--|---|
| Strategy   | Level(s) of Influence   |
| Invite local arts, culture, and leisure programs and initiatives to be “at the table” in local policy and strategy groups.           |  |
| Co-create arts, culture, and leisure initiatives with communities and support grassroots leadership.                                 |  |
| Facilitate intergenerational exchange through arts, culture, and leisure engagement.   |  |
| Adopt social prescribing in healthcare and community-based settings.   |  |
| Carve out funding for arts, culture, and leisure in annual budgets, effectively leveraging resources to maximize and sustain impact. |  |

**Table 2: How to Implement Strategies Effectively**



# Gaps and Implications for Research

While a growing body of research highlights the potential of arts, culture, and leisure to address social isolation, loneliness, and connection (SILC), important gaps remain in understanding how these activities influence social connection across populations, environments, and systems. Existing studies suggest associations between creative and recreational participation and outcomes such as belonging, social support, and reduced loneliness, yet many rely on cross-sectional designs or program-specific evaluations. The following questions highlight areas where additional research could strengthen the evidence base and guide more effective policy and practice.

- How do different forms and characteristics of arts, cultural, and leisure participation influence social connection outcomes?
- How do access, equity, and participation barriers shape who benefits from arts, culture, and leisure opportunities?
- How do digital and hybrid arts and leisure experiences influence social connection?
- How can we better understand and measure the broader community and systems-level impacts of arts, culture, and leisure?

## Conclusion

Artists, cultural organizations, educators, public health professionals, planners, and policymakers each play a role in shaping the environments and systems that support connection. By recognizing arts, culture, and leisure as vital components of community life and social infrastructure, stakeholders can expand opportunities for people to gather, create, and connect. Through sustained participation, inclusive design, and cross-sector collaboration, arts, culture, and leisure can help communities cultivate environments where connection becomes part of everyday life.

[Read Full Report](#)

[Provide Feedback](#)

# 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, Orłowska 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. Holt-Lunstad J. Social Connection as a Public Health Issue: The Evidence and a Systemic Framework for Prioritizing the “Social” in Social Determinants of Health. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2022;43(1):193- 213. doi:10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732
7. As stated in Holt-Lunstad (2018), the socio-ecological model underpinning the SOCIAL Framework has “a hierarchy of levels of influence” that shape our social relationships. The hierarchy’s depiction as concentric circles reflects how the levels shape one another from both the top-down and bottom-up, thereby highlighting the need to address social connection at every level <sup>(1, 8)</sup>
8. Holt-Lunstad J. Why Social Relationships Are Important for Physical Health: A Systems Approach to Understanding and Modifying Risk and Protection. *Annu Rev Psychol*. 2018;69(1):437-458. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011902
9. CDC. Health in All Policies. Office of the Associate Director for Policy and Strategy. Published June 18, 2019. Accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/policy/hiap/index.html>
10. CDC. The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Published January 18, 2022. Accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/social-ecologicalmodel.html>
11. Otte, H. (2019). Bonding or bridging? On art participation and social cohesion in a rural region of the Netherlands. *Poetics*, 76, 101355. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.02.006>
12. Sonke, J., Lee, J., Morgan, N., Burch, S., Akram, S., Belden, C., Carroll, G. D., Rodriguez, A. K., Webb, C., Li, D., Pineda, K., Eskridge, C., Occhiuzzi, M., Pesata, V., & Colverson, A. (2025). Relationships between Arts Participation, Social Cohesion, and Well-Being in 18 US Communities: A New Theory of Change. *Leonardo*, 58(6), 582–593. <https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.a.2551>
13. Jackson, M. R., Kabwasa-Green, F., & Herranz, J. (2015). Cultural vitality in communities: Interpretation and indicators. Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50676/311392-Cultural-Vitality-in-Communities-Interpretation-and-Indicators.PDF>
14. Fancourt, D., & Finn, S. (2019). What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/329834>
15. Pearsall, C. (2019). The Relationship of Adaptive Sport Participation on Sense of Community and Community Integration [Recreation and Leisure Studies , East Carolina University ]. <https://thescholarship.ecu.edu/items/99c3221a-8b1c-4abc-8841-b1301b7cccea>
16. Gingrich, O., Havsteen-Franklin, D., Grant, C., Renau, A., & Hignell-Tully, D. (2024). Participatory presence – social connectedness through collaborative art practices. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 1–25.
17. Keyes, H., Gradidge, S., Forwood, S. E., Gibson, N., Harvey, A., Kis, E., Mutsatsa, K., Ownsworth, R., Roeloffs, S., & Zawisza, M. (2024). Creating arts and crafting positively predicts subjective wellbeing. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1417997. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1417997>
18. Bone, J. K., Fancourt, D., Fluharty, M. E., Paul, E., Sonke, J. K., & Bu, F. (2022). Cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between arts engagement, loneliness, and social support in adolescence. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 58(6), 931–938. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02379-8>
19. Tymoszuk, U., Spiro, N., Perkins, R., Mason-Bertrand, A., Gee, K., & Williamon, A. (2021). Arts engagement trends in the United Kingdom and their mental and social wellbeing implications: HEartS Survey. *PLoS ONE*, 16(3), e0246078. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246078>
20. Sonke, J. S., Pesata, V. L., Colverson, A., Morgan-Daniel, J., Rodriguez, A. K., Carroll, G. D., Burch, S., Abraham, A., Akram, S., Marjani, S., Belden, C., & Karim, H. (2025). Relationships between arts participation, social cohesion, and well-being: an integrative review of evidence. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13, 1589693. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1589693>